

CURIOUS PUBLIC



Communications and Marketing Plan 2024-2027

August 11, 2023
Prepared by **Curious Public and Counsel Public Affairs**
for the **County of Brant**

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Introduction

The County of Brant is seeking to develop the County’s second Communications and Marketing Plan. That plan would guide the high-level objectives and direction of the County’s communications activities for the next four years.

The Communications and Marketing Plan would also help the County become a leader in providing outstanding communication and engagement to the community and public at large, as well as improving internal communications to support County staff and Council.

Today, narrative has become a key driver of much of government communications. In fact, some governments even appoint a “chief storyteller” to help flow a corporate narrative through their communications channels. The County of Brant is seeking to become a leader in narrative-driven communications.

Thanks to their background in this narrative mode of strategic communications, Curious Public and Counsel Public Affairs (hereafter: “the team”) were chosen to lead the development of this process. Starting in January 2023, the team conducted surveys and interviews, reviewed processes and workflows, and researched the best practices of other municipal governments around the country to pull together the County’s second Communications and Marketing Plan.

This plan will serve as a model of how best to deliver, execute and support the delivery of best-in-class communications between the County of Brant and the public, as well as internal communications.

Executive Summary

The Communications and Marketing Plan was developed after weeks of exhaustive research and interviews by the team – those insights form the first section of this report. In addition to the recommendations (which appear in greater detail at the end of this document), there are four key elements of the plan to highlight. These are:

1) Guiding Principles:

Based on our research, consultations and insights, we have come up with six guiding principles to shape the communications and marketing plan for the County of Brant, for the next four years. Together, each guiding principle has informed the foundation of the plan.

2) The Master Narrative:

Master narratives are foundational and strategic documents that are used internally to guide communications and align the team around a common story.

Narratives answer the questions: who are we, who do we serve, and what do we do? As such, narratives form the background and the context of messaging, rather than its content - although elements of the narrative may find their way explicitly into written materials from time to time.

3) Mission, Vision and Tone:

The mission statement describes the “how” of the County’s communications activities, while the vision statement focuses on the “why,” or the meaning behind the County’s communications activities. Finally, the tone we have outlined for Brant is consistent with the values the County brings to communications - both internally and externally.

4) Strategic Recommendations:

To achieve the objectives set out by the guiding principles, the plan establishes 39 strategic recommendations.

Recommended Guiding Principles of the Master Plan

- Maintain high quality, timely communications
- Maintain balance between traditional and digital channels
- Use narrative-driven communication to help residents understand growth
- Strive for plain-language, digestible content
- Empower councillors and staff as spokespeople and ambassadors
- Invest in engagement and seek out-of-the box ideas

Recommended Master Narrative: “A grand welcome”

Brant does not have a set “narrative” per se at the moment, but there is a story to be told by the County’s existing communications. The most important thing is that most of the County’s

communications tell a story that is service-oriented—from notices of road closures to information about garbage and recycling to recreational programs. The story this tells is that the County is here to make life easier for residents.

The downside of this narrative is that it is largely reactive. The County has an opportunity to build a narrative that looks to the future—and the challenges that come with it.

The biggest challenge the County faces in the future is similar to that of municipalities across Ontario and across Canada—the challenge of high population growth. All municipalities are struggling to keep pace with growth, which causes increased demand for services, threatens the “small town” feel prized by so many within the County, and makes traffic worse.

Growth is coming to all municipalities—whether they wish it or not. That’s why we recommend that the County “own the narrative” on growth, reassuring residents that it will protect things they care about while taking advantage of the benefits increased growth has to offer.

Recommended Mission, Vision and Tone

Recommended Communications Mission Statement

We inform the people of Brant about our County’s services and help them be part of decisions that affect our community by delivering high-quality communications.

Recommended Communications Vision Statement

We are municipal leaders in forward-thinking, engaging communications as we do our part to give everyone in Brant a grand welcome.

Recommended Communications Tone

In its interaction with the public and internally, Brant Communications will be:

- Helpful
- Creative
- Clear
- Respectful
- Inclusive
- Proactive
- Accurate
- Professional
- Collaborative
- Timely
- Provide value
- Story-driven
- Best-in-class
- Measurable

Strategic Recommendations

Process and Capacity Improvements

This group of strategic recommendations focus on how the County of Brant can improve its communications processes and capacity. Improved processes will improve communications coordination, maintain consistent communication standards and practices, and create a more focused approach to communications overall at the County. Improved capacity for

communications in targeted areas will ensure the County has the resources it needs to achieve the recommended guiding principles of the Communications and Marketing Plan, and will also help the County deliver best-in-class communications.

1. Improve internal awareness of staff roles/responsibilities.
2. Inspire greater engagement from designated departmental Comms/Marketing liaisons with “Lunch and Learn” style events.
3. Involve HR in building out Jostle.
4. Give the Communications and Marketing Division a formal seat at the leadership table.
5. Continue emphasis on expanding a plain language approach to all formal documents to increase understanding and engagement.
6. Similarly, continue to emphasize digestible communications to increase understanding and engagement.
7. Examine the frequency of communications and timelines for critical projects, and establish a cadence for communications around critical projects.
8. Improve performance across County social media channels.
9. Develop public engagement best practices.
10. Improve awareness of ongoing projects and activities with an internal dashboard.
11. Designate and empower “Brant ambassadors.”
12. Incorporate more of the tools and features available through Bang the Table.
13. Expand and improve non-digital communications with more print mail/direct mail.
14. Continue the Division’s work to build and execute an omnichannel engagement campaign.
15. Improve user experience across the County’s main website.
16. Encourage Brant ambassadors to engage with the public school system to bring civics into classrooms.
17. Build processes to “close the loop” on public feedback.
18. The Communications and Marketing Division to approve all public-facing material.
19. Re-examine social media practices and output.
20. Increasing Communications and Marketing Division capacity with more staff and training.
21. The Division to take on the design of all public-facing visual assets for greater brand consistency.
22. Apply an Issues Management lens to all County decision-making.

Narrative Transition

This group of recommendations will support the County of Brant’s transition to narrative-driven communications under this plan, ensuring a cohesive story and tone is conveyed in all communications from the County.

23. Key message development.
24. Update existing products and materials.

Staff Development

This group of recommendations will ensure County staff have the skills necessary to execute the Communications and Marketing Plan.

25. Narrative training for communications staff
26. Train all staff on basics in issues and emergency management.
27. Conduct plain-language training workshop
28. Create a comprehensive communications professional development plan.

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Best Practices

This group of recommendations will help put the County on the path to becoming a municipal leader in equity, diversity, and inclusion when it comes to its communications.

29. Re-examine the Official Special Day list and create decision-making rubric to determine which diverse religious, cultural, or social observances the County of Brant observes.
30. Revamp digital images
31. Inclusive communications and leadership training for senior staff and Council.
32. Investigate Google Translate and other tools for adding translation capability to the website and important documents.
33. Create and implement an EDI “style guide” to help the Accessibility Department.
34. Outreach role to take on community and cultural consultation.
35. Prioritize EDI focus in all strategic planning.
36. Strengthen Indigenous engagement.

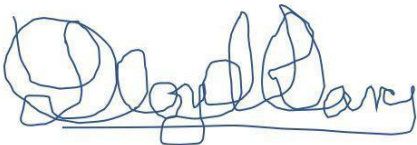
Non-traditional Communications and Marketing Recommendations

This group of recommendations are “out of the box” ideas the County can use to promote engagement and build community in Brant.

37. Virtual town tours
38. Develop and implement County-branded “grand welcome packages” to be run and overseen by the Engagement Specialist.
39. “Doors Open” style events hosted by the County

The team is pleased to deliver the County of Brant Communications and Marketing Plan recommendations and looks forward to its successful implementation.

Sincerely,



Lloyd Rang
Project Lead

Methodology Overview

Communications audit

The team at Curious Public conducted a communications audit that included:

- Reviewing documents provided by the County of Brant's Communications and Marketing Division,
- Reviewing Brant's website,
- Examining its social media channels.

Our audit reviewed all elements of the communications and marketing function in the County.

Consultations - survey

We took a two-pronged approach, conducting a series of interviews with staff, elected officials and stakeholders connected to advisory and focus groups. We also conducted a survey to gather different information and capture candid perspectives not always given during a group consultation session.

Consultations - interviews

The team interviewed several groups through April 2023 to get their perspectives on communications in the County. The team spoke with many internal staff, stakeholders, and elected officials, including:

- **CAO, Division GM, Senior Management Team:** Alison Newton, Darryl Lee, Heather Boyd, Cindy Stevenson, Robert Walton and Pam Duesling.
- **Communications and Marketing Division:** Melissa Connor, Suzie Keczan, Sarah Lennox, Evan Morrison and Lisa Henrique.
- **Elected Officials:** Mayor David Bailey, Jennifer Kyle, John MacAlpine, Steve Howes, Lukas Oakley, John Bell, John Peirce, David Miller and Brian Coleman.
- **Accessibility Advisory Group:** Kealee Wazonek, Jim Harder and Drew Baird.
- **Community Stakeholders:** Gabriel Scott, Henry Perkins, Peter Bailey, Kari Raymer Bishop, Edith Stone, Sherry Lawrence, Susan Miller and Alison Bee.

Competitive/best practice research analysis

The team examined the work output of over 20 different Canadian municipalities to identify best practices at the municipal level. The team then selected five of these to comprehensively review their organizational structure, budgets, and communications and marketing outputs: Grey County, Chatham-Kent County, Prince Edward County, Simcoe County and Annapolis County, Nova Scotia.

The team selected these five counties based on their size, recent population growth and (in four cases) proximity to the GTA which affected population growth and diversity. We chose to examine Annapolis County, Nova Scotia to see how an out-of-province municipality was also

handling growth from a neighbouring urban area, Halifax. It is also home to an internationally recognized tourist destination, the Bay of Fundy.

In addition, we also included some best practices based on our research from other municipalities that were not part of the comprehensive review.

Insights from Communications Audit

The team performed a high-level communications audit, looking at a range of documents provided by Brant's Communications and Marketing Division, reviewing the County's websites, and examining its social media channels. Our findings are summarized below:

External Communications

Getting the Big Things Right

The County of Brant produces a high volume of excellent communications products across multiple channels, and its most engaged residents give it high marks for its efforts. In survey results provided to Curious Public by the County, over half of Brant residents rated the County's communications as 8 or higher on a scale of 1-10. Less than 17% rated the County's communications as 5 or lower.

The Communications and Marketing Division manages to get the balance between print and digital communications right and engages regularly with residents to ensure it is delivering information residents want in the way that they want it.

The campaign to fund the new health hub also shows the County can deliver a complex, integrated campaign across multiple communications channels when required, and the 2021 Economic Development report shows the County can produce substantial communications products that tell a story.

Room to grow on social

The County's owned social media channels, including YouTube, are impressive given Brant's size. On Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, the County posts timely updates that give residents useful information. The high engagement on posts about road closures and weather warnings suggests traffic is top of mind for many Brant residents. Brant's YouTube channel boasts over 600 subscribers and continues to grow, featuring content including Council proceedings, education videos, and the standout YouTube series "People of Brant." Cross-promotion of all content across the County's social channels appears to be consistent.

However, the County's sub-brands do not meet this standard. The County Paramedics Facebook page has a somewhat unprofessional appearance and hasn't been updated regularly since December 2022. The Paramedics Twitter account has no posts past 2016, and its Instagram has no activity whatsoever. Graphics published by the Paramedics' social media channels are sometimes missing County branding.

County of Brant Fire's social media is better aligned with the County's brand, but also appears neglected. Regular posts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram were largely stopped at the end of December 2022. The posts that were shared aligned with Brant's brand tone, colours, and featured the County's logo.

The County's Economic Development and Tourism pages are both well-aligned with the County's brand, but there is room for improvement here. Economic Development posts tend to be quite long, and its graphics are crowded and wordy, resulting in hard-to-read content and low audience engagement. The County posts tourism content on Twitter and Facebook regularly, but not all is directly relevant to residents at face value and can be inconsistent. For example, while promotion of the County's programs is solid (e.g., Music in the Parks), some heritage months and holidays are promoted (e.g., Sikh Heritage Month, National Poetry Month) while others are not (e.g., Ramadan, Passover, Easter).

New Website, Same Problems

Even though the County has a newly redesigned website, there is still room to grow to make the County's website easier to navigate. The user experience could be improved by having fewer clicks between the homepage and other high-traffic pages like services or popular topics.

For example, it appears residents can pay their property taxes through the County website. But the route to get there from the homepage isn't easy to follow and takes multiple steps.

Similarly, a search on the homepage for "Council Minutes" does not bring up past Council meetings as its first result. Instead, that search brings up upcoming Council meetings. Past council meetings for every committee are then listed farther down. The information is there – but not optimized to meet users' intents.

Internal Communications

Structured to Get Things Done

The County of Brant's Communications and Marketing Division is a small but mighty team that gets things done. The Division's organizational structure began with one full-time employee flanked by two others in part-time roles. The team has since grown to five full-time staff in just five years. The division of responsibilities is appropriate to each team member's experience and specialization. Roles are delineated, with each assigned to lead designated tasks or processes without overlap of responsibilities. And examining the workflow of projects shows that each member has touchpoints where they can both strategize and execute on projects they lead.

The approvals process suggests that each team member is empowered to lead their designated projects and tasks without duplication of process or bottlenecks. There are clearly defined instances when team members should call the Communications Director into the process for help. It feels like there is a lot of trust and empowerment within the Division to get things done. It is very likely that the Division's well-designed structure helps it produce.

And it does produce! The County's last marketing and communications strategic plan outlined 17 goals. These goals covered external and internal communications – in some cases,

establishing new channels, policies, and processes. In just over three years, the Division completed all 17 goals.

Clear and Connected

The County's tagline is "Simply Grand," but if it were looking for a tagline for its Communications and Marketing Division, it would be "Clear and Connected" – particularly regarding internal communications.

Over the last five years, the Division has worked to establish well-connected channels and engagement points for internal communications. And they've revamped those communications to be clear and accessible to everyone.

Connect

The County of Brant uses the internal communications platform, Jostle, as a centrally located tool to connect staff, share information and host engagement campaigns, like contests and team challenges. Jostle's capabilities are like Facebook, Slack, Asana, and a staff directory rolled into one, meaning that staff can have two-way communication by messaging each other, "liking" posts or sharing articles, checking in on campaigns and event calendars, or quickly getting information about staff and division contacts. The Communications and Marketing Division manages Jostle, in collaboration with Human Resources, and regularly incorporates it into campaigns.

The Division has grown the activity on this platform considerably since its implementation in 2018. The Division ran seven events and engagements in the first year on the channel. That number grew to 23 engagement campaigns, including eight contests in 2022.

Many of the County's staff engage with the platform. Jostle's analytics show that top engagement ranges from 100 to 80%. Council represented the lowest of that top engagement group – but is still quite engaged. The lowest engagement rate ranges between zero to 25%; the Roads, Fire, Paramedics, Accessibility and Public Transit departments make up this group.

Given their lower numbers, the County's decision to combine the Fire and Paramedics into a single paid account makes financial sense.

Clear

Collaborating with other departments to implement the use of plain language across County materials was one of the Division's successfully completed goals from the previous strategic plan – and the effort shows. The County's communications are "head and shoulders" above other governments' regarding its use of plain language principles. Brant gives its staff, stakeholders and elected officials clear, digestible and more accessible materials which all go towards improving comprehension – an important factor when considering the volume of communications that staff or elected officials get on any given day.

In addition to using plain language best practices, the Division also put in place the practice of writing executive summaries for all reports and projects. Again, that practice goes a long way to

helping staff and officials quickly and easily understand information that can impact how they perform their roles and discuss initiatives with the public.

Clarifying and building communications skills through training for staff and officials has also been a priority for the Communications and Marketing Division. The Division has made media training available to applicable staff to improve communications when they represent the County on important issues before the media. The Division has reinforced its work revamping the County's customer service standards by offering training to a dedicated customer services team while at the same time promoting customer service standards for all staff and council on Jostle.

The open, clear, and connected internal communications established by the Division allow staff and council to both get and give information. For example, the Division will promote customer service standards via internal channels. But also, the customer service team will regularly share with the Communications and Marketing Division any trends of concern it hears from the public – allowing the Division to create wider-spread content to address trending issues proactively.

Consistent Brand

There are many ways people can interact with the County's brand. So, consistency is paramount. Brant's Communications and Marketing Division has helped the County achieve a more consistent brand through efforts to create policies and processes that can be repeated or adhered to across departments.

Brand Interactions

The Division bolstered Brant's brand by creating standards for customer service. The County trained a dedicated team in these standards and circulated them to all staff, recognizing that each represents the Brant brand. In addition, the County has a clear policy for handling official complaints that staff are well-versed in.

The Division also created policies for social media engagement and moderation – empowering staff and councillors to respond on social media responsibly and as a representative of the County.

Brand Identity

The Division has also created brand and design guidelines for the County. These guidelines make sure that staff and residents can easily spot information, events, or breaking news from the County.

Making sure people can quickly identify Brant's visual brand is important, especially when wanting to relate service disruptions or emergency preparedness information across social media – channels bombarded by visual information.

Brant's core brand elements are strong and consistent, but some departments identify themselves with distinct but consistent brand colour variations. For example, Economic Development. These variations are still within guidelines and do not change the core brand elements.

Insights from Survey Results

Curious Public sent surveys to County staff, elected officials, Brant's Accessibility Advisory Group, and residents who volunteered to speak with the team in focus groups through the consultation process.

Two surveys were distributed: (1) County staff ("internal group/respondents") and (2) elected officials, Accessibility Advisory Group and select residents ("external group/respondents"). While some questions were duplicated in both surveys, others relating to processes, resources, approach and organizational challenges, were specific to the internal respondents.

The surveys gave the team additional information and insights to complement and contextualize the insights gleaned from consultations. It also allowed the team to survey County staff not present in consultations.

We have used this survey to validate findings from the consultations. Both will work together to create the "bigger picture" that will inform our proposed Master Narrative and Plan.

The survey received 16 out of 24 external responses and 14 out of 22 internal responses. The survey comprised qualitative and quantitative questions on audience, diversity, inclusion and accessibility, seniors, communications culture, resources and process, and engagement. The feedback is summarized below.

Audience (all respondents)

There was strong conviction across respondents that residents were the most critical audience for the County's marketing and communications.

External respondents felt strongly that local businesses and organizations were a significant audience, following residents. On the other hand, internal respondents believed elected officials were an important secondary audience for communications and marketing, followed by businesses and organizations.

The differences in rankings for secondary audiences make sense, given each group's interest.

Diversity and Inclusion (all respondents)

Generally, all respondents agreed that the County's Communications and Marketing Division does a good (if not very good) job of ensuring materials, events, and channels were representative and inclusive of diverse audiences, and accessible to all audiences.

Several respondents shared that while the County is doing an excellent job in this area, there is still "room for improvement." Sometimes respondents defined that sentiment, and sometimes not. However, throughout qualitative data for this survey section, respondents noted that the County could improve representation and inclusion with newcomers, non-English speakers, differently-abled citizens, and seniors.

Representation

Most respondents believe the County does a good job of representing diverse people and interests in its marketing and communications. Many respondents shared that they had noticed a positive change, specifically in the visual representation of diversity, over the last several years. And some respondents commented that diversity of age and gender was well represented.

Some respondents pointed to representing diversity of race and ability as areas where the County could improve. One respondent who commented on diversity of race and ability, noted that visuals should be representative of Brant's growing newcomer communities. Another respondent praised the County's efforts regarding diversity and offered that the County's communications could consider highlighting the different ethnic communities now living in Brant. One suggestion was to include more newcomers in the "People of Brant" series, which the respondent said was a good initiative from the County.

Inclusion

Similar to the question of representation, many respondents felt the County was doing a good job in this area. Internal respondents leaned more positively than external respondents, but both largely fell between "somewhat" to "very good."

NOTE: Some external respondents shared issues regarding the *physical* inclusion and accessibility of the County versus its communications and marketing in their qualitative responses. The focus of these responses may explain some of the slightly lower rankings in this area from external respondents.

There was a feeling that the County's Communications and Marketing Division does a great job of promoting inclusive spaces and opportunities that the community is creating. However, one respondent also offered that there could be more focus and communications around "creating an inclusive community" as "some members of the community are not embracing change."

One respondent identified that the Division could "stay aware" of issues and events that could impact the diversifying County. And other respondents noted that the County could extend more inclusion to Indigenous people, visible minorities, differently-abled citizens, and people who are immuno-compromised or still impacted by COVID-19.

Accessibility

Similar to answers on “inclusion,” internal respondents leaned more positively than the external respondents. Still, a solid middle in each group felt the County does a good job in this area.

Internal respondents noted that communications and marketing materials are AODA-compliant (Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act) where possible when they go to the public. But an internal respondent also shared that the volume of materials that go to the public is potentially too great for any one department to handle and suggested that the County train staff across departments on how to make their materials AODA-compliant.

Both internal and external respondents agreed that the County does a good job of putting out communications and marketing on both digital and traditional channels – helping them all gain access to information. But several respondents within both groups mentioned that digital media was harder for seniors to access. And a respondent within the external survey group shared the *perception* that people without internet, smart devices or social media accounts get *less* communication from the County. Another respondent from the external group pointed out that the County’s promotional signage often directed viewers to a website versus a telephone number for more information.

Respondents in both groups wanted to see Brant’s communications and marketing open up to non-English speakers. Respondents suggested a translation service on the County’s website and communications and marketing materials in multiple languages.

Seniors

Respondents in both groups generally believed the County does an okay job with communications reaching and serving the needs of seniors. But, as with other answers, internal respondents leaned more positively than external.

The qualitative data for this survey section helped contextualize the quantitative data. There was a mix of opinions within the external audience. Many suspected that a large group of seniors did not use social media and could not access as much information as the rest of the (online) public. A few respondents shared that their answer was based on what they’d heard in the community and not their own opinion, which would have been more favourable.

Respondents in the internal group shared that seniors are a difficult audience to communicate with. The County makes print materials available and has increased mailouts over the last few years. But one respondent shared that the County has problems reaching some seniors regardless of increased print material because of issues with Canada Post routes.

Respondents in both groups made suggestions: 1) ensure print material and signs share timely information; 2) focus on traditional media channels like print and radio; and 3) promote events or share information at seniors-focused events and programs in the County.

“Empathy” was a running theme shared in respondents’ comments within this survey section. Generally, people focused less on what the County wasn’t doing. Instead, they shared an appetite

to learn more about others or make sure potentially excluded communities had the same opportunities as others to learn and participate in civic and community activities.

Engagement (all respondents)

Most people in both survey groups engaged with Brant through online channels. Percentages skew higher for the internal group than the external – 77% and 62.5%, respectively.

None of the respondents said they used screen readers or assistive technology, but many people commented throughout the survey that they appreciated how accessible the County’s online information was. People who engaged with Brant online listed the following as reasons behind their enjoyment:

- Easy, accessible and timely information
- Great visuals
- A chance to keep up with community events
- Compelling brand identity
- Positive messaging
- A good mix of news and entertainment
- Open opportunity for civic engagement

Engagement With the Strategic Plan

The County recently drafted its Strategic Plan, outlining the priorities for the next four years. One of the priorities is sustainable and managed growth, which the team learned was a divisive topic within Brant.

The County deployed a good amount of communication around the Strategic Plan across all its channels and hosted virtual and in-person town halls to discuss the plan. Because the Strategic Plan is a recent hot topic, for which the County gave considerable marketing and communications effort, the team asked respondents about this initiative to gauge if there was any disconnect between the County’s output and audience uptake.

We asked both internal and external survey groups: “In addition to what’s already available, is there more information you need to feel well-informed about [the sustainable and managed growth] priority?”

Most respondents within both groups felt that they didn’t need more information about the priority of sustainable and managed growth. Like online engagement, internal respondents ranked slightly higher than external respondents – 84.6% and 62.5%, respectively.

We also asked the people who said they needed more information to specify what information they needed. Answers varied between internal and external respondents.

Only two internal respondents (15.4%) said they needed more information. They said that the information they needed concerned growth timelines and policy – information not in the

Communications and Marketing Division's control. But one mentioned that they wanted real-time updates on how the County was "implementing and responding to growth."

In the external group, six respondents (37.5%) said they needed more information. The information they needed was divided into two camps: 1) they needed speaking points to share information regarding the Strategic Plan with the community; or 2) they didn't know the Strategic Plan existed or where to find information about it.

Additionally, we asked the internal group what channels they felt were most effective in promoting the draft of the Strategic Plan, and what channels they wanted to see the County use for future promotion of the Strategic Plan.

People believed that EngageBrant and online surveys were the most effective tools for promoting the draft of the Strategic Plan. They also noted that the County's use of social media and creating a mix of in-person and digital information events was effective and should be part of future promotions. One respondent commented, "the combined engagement methods utilized for the Plan have been great and offer a variety of opportunities for participation."

Other Engagement Suggestions

Respondents also shared additional opportunities the County might consider to keep engagement strong:

- Keeping physical signs and materials easy to read and up to date
- Rotating the location of committee meetings around the County
- Hosting open forum town halls to answer questions from the public.

Communications Culture and Service Delivery (internal respondents only)

The team asked the internal survey group to comment on the Communications and Marketing Division's approach, engagement methods, resources and process.

There is high regard for the Communications and Marketing Division among staff. Overall, respondents agreed that the Division's approach to communications and marketing is "just right" – not too creative or too cautious – and that they are proactive. Internal respondents believed that the Division is easy to engage with. Although the timing of when to engage and the constraint of time due to workload were mentioned as challenges throughout different sections of the internal survey.

Messaging Focus

Internal respondents believed the County's communications should prioritize day-to-day services like garbage collection, snow removal and road closures.

They also expressed a secondary priority for promoting programs offered by the County and promoting local business and agriculture. Additionally, respondents noted that it was important to inform residents about the County's Official Plan and communicate emergency preparedness.

Generally, there was less enthusiasm to rank promoting tourism as a priority.

Approach

A strong majority of respondents believe that the Communications and Marketing Division is proactive in its approach. Respondents noted that the Division is "well prepared" with materials, media, and posting timely information regarding road closures, snow removal, and other day-to-day services.

The qualitative data regarding the approach needed context behind some of the answers that the Division is "reactive." Some respondents explained that the role of communications often encompassed reacting to unforeseen events and issues. The intention behind the question was to ask about the Division's *approach* to communications rather than gauge the *nature* of the role. The team takes ownership for any confusion over this question and infers that the Division's approach is considered proactive.

However, one response to this question did note that the volume of work that municipal staff face makes proactive communication difficult.

Most respondents felt that the County did not need to be "more proactive." But some respondents who wanted more proactivity suggested that more strategic touchpoints or regular check-ins with Council and other departments or staff would be helpful to get everyone on the same page about what the County should promote. A respondent also felt that check-ins would help discuss any challenges that might be on the horizon. One respondent suggested that a chance to get ahead of some issues could empower engaged residents to become spokespeople for the County if they had the right messaging.

Internal Engagement (internal respondents only)

Most internal respondents agreed that the Communications and Marketing Division was doing the right amount of engagement over the County's internal communications platform, Jostle. Most didn't want "more" or "less" engagement but "the same."

Respondents agreed that Jostle was a good tool, but many shared that not having enough time in the day for their work stopped them from logging onto the platform. One respondent shared that logging onto the County's social media channels was easier outside of work. Some respondents shared that they or their departments weren't generally on Jostle or didn't use the platform.

A respondent who wanted to see more on the platform specified that they enjoyed articles shared on Jostle about County initiatives and events and would welcome seeing more if

available. Another respondent commented that they wanted to know more about what was happening in the County and that they needed more assistance for photos, video, and posts.

Process and Resources (internal respondents only)

Process

Timing was a running theme through the internal responses to questions regarding process.

All respondents said it was easy to engage the Communications and Marketing Division. But the majority (69%) responded that they felt Brant staff and elected officials only “sometimes” knew *when* to engage the Division. Most respondents (61.5%) indicated that they felt “confident” knowing when to engage the Division to handle issues before they became a problem. Still, 38.5% only felt “somewhat confident” in knowing when to engage the Division on potentially problematic issues.

Timing was present again when the survey asked respondents to identify any organizational challenges that stopped them from improving their communications offerings. Most of the respondents who noted a challenge indicated that it was “not having enough time (engaged too late in the process).” Additionally, some respondents (23%) said “lack of awareness of available supports” was also a challenge.

It should be mentioned that 38% of respondents said that “none of the [issues listed] above” represented an organizational challenge.

Resources

Respondents were given a hypothetical question: if the Communications and Marketing Division received a budget increase, how would they want it spent?

Answers were summarized into the following ideas:

- Changing public opinion about County staff (noting the campaign for winter operators)
- Driving more awareness of events and projects
- Investing in community advocates
- Developing a proactive Communications and Marketing plan
- Increasing printed materials including hard copies of newsletters and Brant welcome packages
- More communications “on-location” or “door-to-door”
- New marketing collateral including digital signs in all communities
- Increasing capacity in the Communications and Marketing Division with more staff

Insights from Consultations

Curious Public had a series of one-hour interviews with a number of different groups to gather feedback about the County's Communications and Marketing. Those groups included the Mayor and councillors, senior County staff, Communications and Marketing Division staff, the Accessibility Advisory Group, the Digital Advisory Group, and the Print and Seniors Advisory Group.

Below is a summary and analysis of the broad themes we heard from these groups. Not every nuance and detail is captured below, but we have gathered what we heard into broad categories.

Overall Observations and Context

We heard that the County of Brant has a unique mix of urban and rural living, with its residents appreciating the small-town feel, natural environment, and sense of belonging. Since the Communications and Marketing Division was formed, the Mayor and staff have effectively collaborated on communications, maintaining a strong connection with the community.

As the County of Brant continues to grow and evolve, there is an increasing need to manage the expectations of both long-term residents and newcomers, who may be attracted to the area's small-town atmosphere but become frustrated when new developments arise. As one resident mentioned, "One of the ironies we've all run into is that people who moved here a year ago moved here because they wanted that small-town feel – and now they get mad when they see new houses being built."

Communications Assessment

Overall, the County's Communications and Marketing Division received near universal praise from every group we consulted with. We heard that the County's communications have improved by leaps and bounds since the Communications and Marketing Division was formed. We also heard that the Division is proactive, responsive, and exercises good judgement with every communications product.

*"Whether it's in the paper or delivering social media, there's a multitude of different ways that we get out information, and Melissa and our team do an amazing job on that."
- Consultation participant*

The Division has made significant progress in using more channels to get its message out, both on social media and using traditional methods like direct mail. Communications are also largely viewed as being friendly to those with accessibility issues.

We heard from both the Division itself and some councillors that the Division could use additional staff coverage to prevent team members from being too stretched, and to help cover

vacations and absences. We also heard a desire for the County's brand to remain stable, while allowing the Division to continue to be flexible as circumstances change.

As it is with many municipalities, citizen engagement with the County is low and could be improved. Reaching everyone in the community through communications is also an area where the County can do better – particularly in areas without access to reliable internet. The audiences served by the County's communications could be expanded, particularly among young families or newcomers.

At the same time, we heard a strong desire expressed for communications to become more plain language and digestible, and to keep the volume of communications at its current level.

“All we can do as the municipality is put that information out there in a digestible form. It's one thing to put the information out there, but somebody can look at it and wonder what the heck does this mean?”

- *Consultation participant*

Narrative, Brand, Tone, and Content

We heard that the County's communications project a respectful, kind, and positive tone – a tone that should be maintained. Since the County's formation 22 years ago, residents have started to identify with being from the County of Brant as well as their local town, village or hamlet. The County's slogan, “Simply Grand” seems to capture the identity of its residents nicely.

“I'm part of St. George, but I'm [also] part of this bigger, kind of entity. So, I feel like, even though I don't live in Paris, I feel like Paris kind of belongs to me as well as all the little villages and hamlets and that it's all part of.”

- *Consultation Participant*

Still, there are areas for improvement. There's an opportunity to build a narrative that connects the County's recent growth and the construction of its new facilities – which have been delayed by labour shortages. We also heard from many participants that communications from the County, particularly when it comes to the Official Plan and construction of new homes, can be overly complicated and hard to understand.

Communications could use more plain language and be broken up into more digestible content at times to help residents understand what is going on.

Engagement

The Communications team is satisfied with EngageBrant, their digital platform for engagement, and views it as a crucial tool post-pandemic. We heard a near universal desire for more engagement, however, which remains an ongoing challenge for municipalities across Ontario.

How to get residents more engaged continues to be a challenge. Some participants noted that while smaller hamlets show higher engagement, larger population centres tend to be less active. Many respondents suggested that to improve engagement, information must flow both ways and residents must see how their feedback is being taken into account in the County's decision-making.

“It's not just the flow of information coming from the County to a resident. It's also the resident to the County, and I would like them to say at the end of the day, 'boy, they're really listening. They're taking our input and they're running with it.' ”

- *Consultation Participant*

We heard that the County believes engagement is critical to its decision-making processes on major initiatives. Several participants were disappointed with the lack of engagement with the County's Master Transportation Plan, which received fewer comments than might be expected – especially given how important an issue roads and traffic are to residents.

The County is hiring a public consultation specialist, which will help to improve the situation. Some participants suggested that exploring more of the tools available through EngageBrant, as well as revisiting the frequency of communication and timelines for critical projects.

“Oftentimes there's an initial communication then a final communication. For example, our transportation master plan, that came up in September, then it just came up again this week [in April]. So, if we have any sort of follow up, like writing a notice of motion and passing a motion and getting people notice for those types of things, we don't have any opportunity until the day we're discussing it. That creates challenges for us to have a good solid democracy.”

- *Consultation Participant*

Social Media

Many participants were happy with the County's approach to social media, and noted that many residents hear about events, updates, and initiatives through one of the County's social media channels. We also heard that paid social media advertising from the County has proven to be effective.

Many participants expressed concern about social media in general, worrying that social media engagement has too much influence on decision-making. In addition, some residents still miss County events posted on socials due to receiving notifications too late.

To improve social media communication, some participants suggested the County ask its public consultation specialist to support County initiatives on social media, that staff be engaged to produce more fact-based content on social media and consider implementing social media guidelines for Council.

Website

Despite a recent revamp, we heard a number of complaints about the County's website. Participants complained of several issues with information accessibility and navigation, which create communication challenges and make it difficult for people to find critical information.

"Most people, when they have a problem, they want to go look it up on Google or on our website. Maybe they say I'm angry about the boulevards and say I'm going to go look up and see what we've said about it. Our site has no way of looking through our minutes or keyword searching anything. So, it's challenging to find that stuff."

- *Consultation Participant*

To improve website communication, participants suggested that the County improve its search function and ensure critical information is easily accessible, especially for screen reader users. Additionally, some suggested that the County create a public-facing dashboard to keep the public updated on the status of various projects and initiatives at a glance.

Print Materials

While there were no complaints about the content of the County's print materials and direct mail, we heard that there is a major issue with inconsistent direct mail delivery across the County that stems from a mismatch between postal codes and municipalities.

"... my address is actually a different municipality even though I live in the County of Brant... There [are no] issues [with] the County sending out our tax bill, but any other mailed communication doesn't come to us because they do everything by postal code."

- *Consultation Participant*

Some participants also noted that the timing when some print materials or direct mail are sent out can impact the product's relevance. One resident noted that there were printed materials from the County at the Burford Arena that advertised programs for a past holiday season.

We also heard that print materials present a major opportunity to reach residents in new ways. One participant suggested creating a monthly mailout advertising upcoming events and activities. Several participants also suggested that the County could develop a booklet for new residents with information on local resources, such as churches, schools, medical facilities, recreation facilities, clubs, and sporting programs. Some participants suggested a similar product for residents with accessibility challenges listing services catered to their needs.

Media Relations

We heard that the County used to rely on local newspapers for much of its communications but have largely pivoted to social media due to the decline in Brant's local media outlets. Some noted that local media only pick up on news releases, and that the County needs to consistently put them out to get coverage. One participant suggested a monthly round-up story on what happened at Council and what it means to residents.

Internal Communications (Council and Staff)

The County's Communications and Marketing Division received positive feedback for their internal communication efforts with Council and staff. The Division was praised for fostering a positive relationship with both Council and staff.

Councillors felt that they were informed of most County decisions, but some expressed a desire for some kind of internal tracking tool with communications priorities, or another kind of dashboard so councillors could more effectively monitor progress, ask questions, and collaborate with staff. They also expressed a desire for fact sheets and briefings on major initiatives like the County's budget to help them communicate more effectively with residents.

We also heard from respondents that there is sometimes confusion among staff about where to direct residents when they contact the County. Developing a "cheat sheet" for staff to guide residents to appropriate resources could help clear things up.

Issues Management

We heard that the County's communications team has done an excellent job at predicting what is coming up, and topics that are trending locally, and using proactive news releases to get ahead of it. There is, however, a concern that the issues management lens isn't always applied to County decision-making. For example, there was a concern with Mile Hill where the issues management approach wasn't applied.

As far as specific issues, speeding and traffic were mentioned by most participants as ongoing concerns for residents. Many residents link increased traffic to the County's growth. Urban sprawl is also an ongoing concern, and there is sometimes a tension between welcoming newcomers and resisting change.

There are large economic development projects underway, and an official plan has been drafted to communicate with the community. However, there are concerns in the community around issues with urban settlement boundaries, affordable housing, and Ontario Land Tribunal decisions. Waste management has also been an issue, with the County forming a waste management committee that has yet to present any recommendations. Some have suggested public discussions by the Committee be ended if no recommendations will be put forward.

Structure and Resources

The Communications and Marketing Division is responsible for all aspects of the County's communications and informing people about the County's services. The large scope of topics to communicate can lead to staff feeling stretched too thin, resulting in some important tasks not getting the attention they deserve. The Division needs assistance with marketing activities, such as website management, and there is enough work for the team to be constantly growing. The team believes they are on top of the latest software, but more training on that software is required. There is a need for more variety in the way things are communicated, such as quick videos that explain what's going on.

Delivery Methods and Channels

The County makes use of a variety of channels to get its messages to residents, including its website, social media, email marketing, printed brochures, direct mail, public engagement events, and more. Brochures and other materials are available at areas, rec centres, and customer service stations.

Direct mail is expensive but necessary as many Brant residents do not have access to the internet. We heard that the County needs to do more to reach residents who do not have access to the internet. We also heard that the Division does a good job of communicating everything as it needs to be communicated, but that it could do a little bit more work on the variety of channels they use to send information.

“I think we do a good job of attempting to communicate everything as it needs to be communicated. I think perhaps where we could do a little bit more work is maybe the variety of channels that we're sending information through.” - *Consultation Participant*

Insights from Competitive Analysis

The team conducted a jurisdictional scan of municipalities like Brant. This section provides an overview of our findings.

The municipalities analyzed include:

- Grey County, Ontario
- Chatham-Kent, Ontario
- Prince Edward County, Ontario
- Simcoe County, Ontario
- Annapolis County, Nova Scotia

Our research focused on the following topics: overall population and recent growth; budget; social media; economic development and tourism communications; paramedic and fire services communications; equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI); and overall public communications, including websites and public engagement.

The County of Brant has experienced significant growth in recent years, like many other counties adjacent to the Greater Toronto Area. For example, Simcoe County has seen a 11.2% increase in its population since 2016, making it the largest county in Ontario based on the 2021 census.

Municipalities across these counties are all striving to keep pace with the rapid growth that has caused an increased demand for services and infrastructure, and each are adjusting service-delivery and communications strategies to keep up with diversifying populations.

Overview of Grey County, Ontario

Grey County, Ontario is made up of a variety of municipalities, including the City of Owen Sound, the Municipality of West Grey, the Township of Southgate, the Municipality of Meaford, and other small hamlets. **The total population of Grey County is 100,905. That number is a 7.5% increase from its 2016 population of 93,830.**

The operating and capital budget for Grey County is \$222.1M. The communications budget is included in the administration's budget. That budget also includes the following departments: CAO/Deputy CAO, Climate Change, Clerks, Emergency Management, Finance, Human Resources, IT, Legal Services, and Communications. The total operating and capital budget for administrative services is \$7,885,700. But it is unclear how this budget is broken down between the departments mentioned above.

The 2023 budget for communications includes a transfer of \$7,500 to reserve for future communications initiatives and a transfer of \$6,000 to reserve for a future update to the Corporate Communications Strategy. As of 2023, the operating tourism budget has been moved from corporate services to Economic Development operations.

The scope of work for the communications team is unclear based on the public information available. However, we were able to find the staffing breakdown. The Manager of Communications is supported by three additional communications staff and reports directly to the CAO/Deputy CAO.

Public Communications

Grey County's website, (www.grey.ca), is well-designed. It provides a comprehensive range of information and resources for residents, visitors, and businesses in the region. The website is user-friendly, featuring a clean, modern design which is visually appealing and intuitive to use. The website offers a wealth of information about the County's history, geography, demographics, and services, as well as news and updates on current events and initiatives. The site also hosts convenient interactive services like paying property taxes, applying for building permits, and accessing online forms and documents. And it has a dedicated section for tourism information like featured attractions, accommodations, events, and activities for visitors to the region.

Grey.ca offers resources and information for businesses looking to start, relocate, or expand in the County, including economic development programs, funding opportunities, and local business directories.

Public Engagement

Grey County does not appear to have a centralized public engagement tool or a webpage on their main site or a microsite that is dedicated to public engagement initiatives.

Recommendations for Improvement

Grey County has a well-designed website, but it needs to improve in terms of its site accessibility, mobile optimization, social media integration, and user feedback mechanisms. The website could be made more accessible to users with disabilities by incorporating alt text for images and captions for videos. It should also be optimized for mobile devices and social media integration, giving users a better experience and making it easier for them to engage with or share content from the site. Additionally, Grey County should consider including a feedback mechanism on the site to let users share their experience and suggest improvements.

Grey County would also benefit from a centralized public engagement tool or dedicated web page on their main site for public engagement opportunities.

Social Media Analysis

Grey County has a consistent and engaging brand. The County runs multiple social media channels. All have consistent branding and share value-driven content and timely information to keep followers engaged and informed.

Economic Development

Grey County is in the process of developing its vision for the next 10 years with a new Economic Development, Tourism, and Culture Master Plan. Economic development includes general operation, tourism, regional attraction and retention, local food, business enterprise centre, local immigration partnerships, and community transportation programs. They have seven dedicated Economic Development and Tourism staff members, and their 2023 budget is \$1,890,900, including provincial and federal grants.

Paramedic Services Communications

Paramedic Services is connected through the County's website instead of having its own site. It appears that Grey County's communications staff is responsible for paramedic communication services.

Fire Services Communications

Unlike Paramedic Services, Grey County does not run communications for Fire Services. Instead, each municipality within the County is responsible for its fire services' communications. For example, Owen Sound Fire Service communications are run by the municipality of Owen Sound, and many of the smaller municipalities have volunteer firefighter services.

Other Notable Initiatives

Grey County produces a newsletter that residents can sign up for via their website. The newsletter gives updates on County news and events.

The County is focusing on a new Climate Change Action Plan from 2022-2050, with a dedicated staff member reporting directly to the CAO.

Lessons Learned

Grey County has recognized that they need a vision for how they want to tackle Economic Development, Tourism and Culture. They are currently in the process of developing their 10-year Master Plan for these areas. Grey County has experienced significant growth over the past few years and as a result, the community has undergone significant change. Grey County also includes the Blue Mountains, Grey Highlands, and is located on Georgian Bay, which has become a popular tourist destination for those looking to escape the GTA. So, there are many geographic and population similarities between Brant and Grey.

Overview of Chatham-Kent, Ontario

Chatham-Kent, Ontario, is made up of several unincorporated municipalities, including Wallaceburg, Blenheim, Dresden, Ridgeway, and Tilbury. **The total population of Chatham-Kent is 103,988. That number increased by 2.3% from the 2016 population of 101,647.**

The total operating and capital budget for Chatham-Kent is \$460.3M. The communications budget is not specified. It is likely that communications fall under one of the following budgets: the Chief Administrative Office Budget of \$1.1M, or the Corporate Services Budget of \$3.9M.

No information is publicly available that outlines the communications team's exact scope of work. But there are two communications officers who report directly to the CAO and a Community Attraction and Promotion division that includes one director, one marketing coordinator, and one administrative assistant.

Public Communications

Chatham-Kent's website (www.chatham-kent.ca), doesn't have an overly sophisticated design but it is easy to navigate.

The homepage features bold headings with respective icons, making it easy for viewers to find what they're looking for. The categories include applications and payment portal, business, community and family, local government, residential services, and tourism.

The homepage also gives users links to helpful information like childcare and early years, the library, customer services, careers, waste management, and municipal council. And the page gives users a drop-down box that can redirect to other municipal websites.

Viewers can also navigate to the bottom of the homepage to find links to important project pages like a crisis update page for the Wheatley explosion and states of emergency, as well as a **page dedicated to the first-ever municipal diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice strategy**.

Public Engagement

Chatham-Kent punches above its weight when it comes to public engagement. Similar to Brant, Chatham-Kent has an engagement portal called (www.letstalkchatham-kent.ca) which is also powered by Bang the Table. They don't appear to be using all of the features of the portal, but they have a very clear engagement tool with two places on their main website page promoting engagement and feedback.

Recommendations for Improvement

Chatham-Kent's website is informative but is too visually busy with links and icons running across the page and drop-down boxes with far too many options. The site would help users find what they're looking for sooner with a more concise organizational structure. They would also do better to feature their social media at the top of the site instead of buried at the bottom. A more prominent placement of social media icons could optimize their reach with visitors navigating from their website.

Social Media Analysis

Chatham-Kent's channels show varying levels of engagement and reach. All channels are consistently branded making them easy to recognize. The municipality's Facebook and Twitter pages have strong followings, with 10.0k and 5.6k followers respectively. But Chatham-Kent's YouTube channel for newcomers only has 336 subscribers.

Recommendations for Improvement

Chatham-Kent could benefit from developing more content for its YouTube channels and increasing its engagement on platforms such as Instagram and Twitter. They also might consider collaborations with local influencers or organizations to broaden their reach.

Economic Development

The Economic Development department in Chatham-Kent is staffed by one director, one manager, one marketing and communications officer, and one administrative staff. This department has its own dedicated Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube accounts.

Paramedic Services Communications

Chatham-Kent EMS contracts Medavid EMS to provide emergency services. Our analysis suggests that Medavid is responsible for the formal communications from Chatham-Kent EMS even though Chatham-Kent EMS has a Facebook page that is regularly updated and appears to be run by the municipality.

Fire Department Communications

The Chatham-Kent County fire department serves all the municipalities within the County and appears to be responsible for their communications via its website and social media accounts.

Lessons Learned

Chatham-Kent has done a great job in self-identifying as a growing and diverse community. That recognition is evident in the municipality's messaging, narrative, and public communications. Notably, a quick online search of Chatham-Kent, highlights the community's growing diversity directly in its SEO and website description. The main webpage also features a prominently displayed section on the municipality's first-ever "Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice Strategy."

This [page](#) lays out a comprehensive roadmap for engagement and development of the strategy and includes a monthly updated calendar featuring "DEIJ Days of Observance." Chatham-Kent's DEIJ page is hosted on their engagement portal using Bang the Table software. It serves as a valuable resource for community members seeking to understand and engage with Chatham-Kent's ongoing DEIJ efforts.

Overview of Prince Edward County, Ontario

Prince Edward County, Ontario includes several unincorporated municipalities or wards such as Picton, Wellington, Bloomfield, Hillier, Hallowell, Ameliasburgh, Athol, Sophiasburgh, North Marysburgh, and South Marysburgh. **The population of Prince Edward County is 25,704 – a 3.9% increase from its 2016 population of 24,735.**

The 2023 operating budget for Prince Edward County is \$71.6M, and no information is specified in their 2022 or 2023 budget regarding the communications budget.

The scope of work for the communications team includes sharing relevant, timely, and accurate news and information with residents, stakeholders, and the media. They utilize a mix of

traditional and digital tools to reach a broad audience and cover media relations, external communications, internal communications, monthly community newsletters, marketing and advertising, web presence, social media, and PEC branding and visual identity.

Based on public information available, Prince Edward County employs a communications and consultation supervisor and a communications coordinator within the Community Services, Programs, and Initiatives department. It is unclear how many additional staff support the County's communications.

Public Communications

The County's website, (www.thecounty.ca), is a "one stop shop" for all things Prince Edward County. The homepage features a search engine and clear section headings for improved user-experience, icons redirecting to various areas of the site and a news section featuring the latest updates.

Public Engagement

Prince Edward County recently launched a new public engagement portal (www.haveyoursay.thecounty.ca). Similar to the County of Brant, this engagement portal is powered by Bang the Table.

Overall, the County appears to make public engagement a priority. Visitors to their webpage quickly get a pop-up window directing to current engagement opportunities. The portal also gives residents the chance to sign-up for notifications about engagement opportunities.

Recommendations for Improvement

Prince Edward County's site could still use some improvements. Links above headings could be organized into drop-down menus for cleaner design. Additionally, the site's contrast should be adjusted to improve accessibility.

Social Media Analysis

The County's social media channels aren't connected to each other in terms of branding or content strategy – each has its own brand identity. Still, the County shares relevant information across its channels, with tourism channels being the most popular.

Economic Development

The Prince Edward County Community Development department operates a website called "Build a New Life" to advertise different economic development opportunities and highlight new businesses. The "Doing Business" page on the County website has many economic initiatives and programs available to local businesses, such as the Community Futures program.

Paramedic Services Communications

The Ambulance service in Prince Edward County is contracted through Hastings-Quinte EMS service and has an office in Picton. Hastings-Quinte EMS controls communications as they are located nearby in Belleville, Ontario. The County Fire and Rescue provides and communicates services to all residents in the County.

Other Notable Initiatives

Prince Edward County has done an amazing job with economic development, creating a popular tourist destination close to the GTA and branding itself as "The County."

Lessons Learned

Prince Edward County, now known as "The County," has transformed over the past decade from a rural municipality just outside of the GTA to a must-visit weekend getaway spot. The County has upped their cachet by creating a brand that "leans in" to their [iconic rural brand](#). Their brand identity is a critical component of their Community Development Strategic Plan and is key to attracting new residents, visitors, and investors.

Prince Edward County's success story illustrates the importance of having consistent and accessible branding, messaging, and storytelling. The County has attracted more tourists and investment by presenting a clear and cohesive image of themselves.

Additionally, the County is leveraging the Bang the Table software to promote greater engagement. For example, a popup window presents itself to visitors on the main webpage and displays open engagement opportunities for the visitor to access. The popup window is a clever tactic for increasing awareness and driving more responses to public engagement opportunities.

Overview of Simcoe County, Ontario

The County of Simcoe, Ontario is the largest county in the province based on the 2021 census. **It has a population of 533,169 – an 11.2% increase from 2016.** Several municipalities make up the County, including towns and townships such as Bradford West Gwillimbury, Clearview, Collingwood, Essa, Innisfil, Oro-Medonte, Midland, Ramara, New Tecumseth, Severn, Penetanguishene, Springwater, Wasaga Beach, Adjala-Tosorontio, and Tiny. It is worth noting that Barrie and Orillia are not included in the County of Simcoe. The County's total operating and capital budget is \$817M, and its communications budget for 2023 is \$7.7M.

The communications team is referred to as "Service Simcoe." Service Simcoe is responsible for communications and events, marketing and creative services, public engagement, tourism, and the Simcoe County Museum. The team has 12 full-time equivalent (FTE) employees dedicated to communications, 14.7 FTE employees focused on public engagement, and 7.6 FTE employees dedicated to tourism. The County recently added a program supervisor to the tourism department.

Public Communications

[Simcoe.ca](#) is an excellent resource for residents, businesses, and visitors to Simcoe County. The site has a user-friendly interface and a wealth of information about the County, including its history, demographics, services, and programs. The website also offers online services, including property tax payments, permit applications, and garbage and recycling schedules, and has a dedicated section for tourism information and economic development resources.

Public Engagement

Similar to Grey County, Simcoe County does not appear to have a centralized public engagement tool or a dedicated webpage to public engagement initiatives. The only webpage on the main site that discusses public engagement gives visitors complicated instructions on how to “participate electronically in a public meeting.”

Recommendations for Improvement

The County could improve its website by optimizing it for mobile devices, improving the search functionality, increasing social media integration, enhancing accessibility, and adding language options to serve a more diverse audience.

The County could also benefit from having a centralized public engagement tool or dedicated web page on their main site for public engagement opportunities, given its size and rapid growth.

Social Media Analysis

Simcoe County follows its brand guidelines and standards clearly. All channels link to one another and have a consistent look and tone.

Recommendations for Improvement

The County runs many Twitter accounts and could consider combining them based on followers to streamline their social media presence.

Economic Development

Simcoe County's Economic Development strategy for 2021-2025 has a budget of \$3.1M and a staff of six full-time employees. Economic Development has its own basic website, (www.workinsimcoecounty.ca), featuring its campaign “Made in Simcoe County.” This campaign is sponsored by the Government of Ontario. However, the Economic Development site boasts little engagement.

Paramedic Services Communications

Paramedic communications in Simcoe County are largely done through dedicated social media channels and appear to be led directly by Simcoe County.

Fire Services Communications

Each town in Simcoe County has its own career or volunteer fire department that is responsible for servicing and communicating with its residents.

Lessons Learned

Simcoe County is the largest county in Ontario, after having gone through considerable growth over the past five years. Yet the County is working to catch up in critical areas such as developing a cohesive brand that reflects the region's diversity and growth and defining a clear economic development and tourism strategy – despite Simcoe's ample resources to make these changes happen.

The lesson of Simcoe is one of “owning the narrative.” Simcoe has grown and diversified but without weaving those elements into its story, the County communicates a passive stance. Growth and diversity have happened *to* Simcoe. Because Simcoe hasn’t owned its growth and diversity story, that story continues to grow, making it harder for Simcoe to claim a kind of ownership. Not owning one’s own story then positions governance on the back foot.

Brant is not in the same position as Simcoe – which is a good thing. Brant hasn’t experienced as much growth and diversity as Simcoe but is already taking a much greater and more active stance on owning its growth story. Simcoe serves as encouragement for Brant to keep developing its growth story and taking ownership over it – it is possible that Brant can emerge a leader in communicating growth and diversity, even when compared to larger municipalities outside of the GTA.

Overview of Annapolis County, Nova Scotia

Annapolis County, Nova Scotia **has a population of 21,252 people. That number represents an increase of 3.2% from the 2016 census.** The County's total budget for 2022-23 is \$21.6M, but the County doesn’t provide information about its communications budget.

The Community Development budget is \$742,000 and includes economic development, planning, and development services. It is not clear whether that budget includes funding for Communications.

The Communications team’s scope of work and size are also unclear.

Public Communications

Annapolis County’s website (www.annapoliscounty.ca) is functional but dated. The website is geared primarily to residents and prominently displays resident services. The site also serves visitors.

Public Engagement

Annapolis County does not have a portal or webpage dedicated to public engagement.

Recommendations for Improvement

The County’s website needs modernization.

The site is text-heavy, making it hard for visitors to find information and intuitively understand the navigation. The site also leans heavily on stock photos, missing the chance to showcase the community authentically. And it is doubtful that the site is accessible for visitors using screen readers. The County would also benefit from adding a dedicated public engagement page to their main website.

Social Media Analysis

The social media accounts for Annapolis County focus on administrative and governance matters. The posts are text-heavy and hard to read on mobile. They are also visually unappealing

– mostly screenshots of a text document posted online. This approach does not effectively capture residents’ attention or promote engagement.

Economic Development Communications

There is no designated channel for economic development in Annapolis County. Economic development has a page on the County’s main site, but that page is a barebones design and lacks relevant information – creating a missed opportunity for the County to attract new business to the area.

Fire and Paramedic Services Communications

The responsibility to communicate fire and paramedic services is decentralized. Each town’s fire department appears to be responsible for communicating with residents.

The association representing the County’s 11 volunteer fire services operates its own social media account and the County operates Annapolis Regional Emergency Management Organization’s social media account.

Lessons Learned

The team wanted to extend our examination beyond Ontario to find a county tackling similar growth issues. We selected Annapolis County, Nova Scotia because it has experienced high growth in the past five years. And similar to Brant’s Paris, Annapolis’ Bay of Fundy is a tourist destination.

Unfortunately, Annapolis County’s public communications lack a cohesive brand or narrative. Without these foundational elements they fail to capitalize on their unique offerings for tourism and economic development. Annapolis County misses an opportunity that Brant can avoid by further developing its brand strategy to leverage Brant’s unique features and foster economic development.

The County of Brant is moving in the right direction and these findings serve to increase that momentum.

Insights from Social Listening and Environmental Scan

Social Listening Analysis

During our first social listening environmental scan across a 30-day period (February 15 to March 16), there were a total of 856 mentions of the County, with an average of 29 mentions per day. The purpose of the initial scan was to identify what topics were trending in the area, as well as the overall positive and negative sentiment.

The team conducted a second social listening environmental scan across a 30-day period (June 11th to July 10th), there were a total of 1,050 mentions of the County with an average of 34 mentions per day, (23% increase from previous scan). The purpose of the second scan was to capture new seasonal specific trends, as trends and sentiments in the winter months will be different than the summer.

Social Listening Analysis	
<i>Search Terms: "Brant County" OR "County of Brant" OR "@brantcommunity" OR "Burford" OR "Onondaga" OR ("Paris" AND "Ontario") OR ("Oakland" AND "Ontario") OR ("St. George" AND "Ontario")</i>	
February 15 - March 16, 2023: Social Listening Environmental Scan	June 11 - July 10, 2023: Social Listening Environmental Scan
Mentions	
Total Mentions: 856 Mentions/day average: 29	Total Mentions: 1,050 (23% increase) Mentions/day average: 34 (17% increase)

Top Keywords	
<p>heavy snow</p> <p>ice and snowhead schools and sites cost</p> <p>excuse area damage vehicle roof</p> <p>details roads information effect fraud</p> <p>delays email reports snow</p> <p>serious injury home vehicle tickets</p> <p>few brant county bu... work reason alternate route</p> <p>puck drop package transportation</p>	<p>victim 29p WEATHER ADVISORY coursecoworker few words</p> <p>Indigenous languages language revitalization visit parking lot</p> <p>international comparison numbers vast collection</p> <p>vehicles</p> <p>scorecard rare items response WEATHER ADVISORY</p> <p>progress flag stolen pride vehicle ability</p> <p>relationship world PERSON details ties information TN job</p> <p>h zone identity theft and fraud</p>
Overall Sentiment	
<p>Neutral: 55.1%</p> <p>Positive: 19.9%</p> <p>Negative: 24.3%</p> <p>Not-Rated: 0.7%</p>	<p>Neutral: 36%</p> <p>Positive: 28.6%</p> <p>Negative: 34.4%</p> <p>Not-Rated: 1%</p>

Social Media Audit and Analysis

The County of Brant has established social media accounts on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn. While these accounts are well-optimized and contain consistent information, there are areas where Brant could improve its social media presence.

The team conducted two social media audits, March 2023 and July 2023, to capture and review the performance of the platforms/channels and track progress over time.

In a short period of time, the County of Brant has made significant improvements across multiple social media channels. Most notably, the average number of views per tweet has risen substantially since March 2023, with approximately 200 views/tweet then, and now they are ranging between 350 and 700 views/tweet.

Twitter

In March 2023, the County of Brant had a considerable following with 4,797 users, by July 2023 this number increased to 4,851 (54 new followers). The most notable followers of the County of Brant twitter account are the Brantford Police, OPP West Region, Brantford Expositor, Grand Erie District School Board, City of Brantford, and the Brant County Health Unit. In March 2023, our team noted that although there are high-quality tweets posted frequently, they do not receive a lot of engagement.

By July 2023, this changed. The average number of views per tweet has increased notably since March 2023, with 200 views/tweet then and by July they are ranging between 350 and 700 views/tweet. This increase may be due to frequent retweets by local business C&C Treasures and Councillor Lukas Oakley. To continue this trend, it is recommended that councillors/municipal officials be actively encouraged to share County of Brant tweets.

Instagram

The County's Instagram account followers has grown substantially since March 2023, the account has gained 297 new followers for a total of 5094.

The saved stories are well-organized, but it is difficult to tell what year the posts are from. Updating saved stories more frequently and including the year on graphics would help solve this issue. The account appears to have higher engagement than Twitter, with videos receiving 800-1500 views. However, individual posts tend to only receive 2-20 likes and occasional comments and shares. To increase views and engagement on Instagram, it is recommended that the County of Brant continues to prioritize video content.

Facebook

In March 2023, the County of Brant's Facebook account had the highest number of followers, with 9,400 users, by July 2023 this number increased to 9700, gaining 300 new followers. The account appears to have similar engagement metrics as Instagram (2-20 likes and occasional comments and shares).

The County of Brant has made improvements to their response time to facebook messages, in March 2023, the account was tagged as "Typically replies within a few days." By July 2023, it was changed to "Typically replies within a day."

The County of Brant rating has slightly improved to 4.1 with 45 reviews. However, the County should remove or report the spam reviews on its Facebook page as it is likely negatively impacting the overall rating.

LinkedIn

As of July 2023, Brant has seen an increase of 100 followers on its LinkedIn page, bringing the total number of followers to 1,500. Brant uses its LinkedIn page to exclusively post about the County's Human Resources activities such as job opportunities, new hires, and promotions. These posts get anywhere between 1-10 likes/reposts and announcements about new hires or promotions have greater engagement than those about job opportunities. It is recommended that the County of Brant diversifies the content and use the platform to give additional information about the County, especially economic development, as well as documents like the County's Official Plan, Master Transportation Plan, and other substantial documents. LinkedIn is climbing in popularity as a source for fact-based information following recent changes to Twitter. Better leveraging of this platform could serve Brant well.

Recommendations

Overall, the County of Brant has established a strong social media presence across its platforms by sharing consistent and engaging information. Between March 2023 and July 2023, Brant has also made considerable improvements on multiple platforms.

The County can strengthen its presence further by working to increase engagement, diversify content, and give additional information about the County.

Please see the Strategic Recommendations section for a full breakdown of recommendations and timelines.

Insights from Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Review

Effective communication builds and maintains trust, understanding, and inclusivity in any community. Municipalities and governments at every level have a responsibility to make sure their communication practices are accessible, inclusive, and representative of their growing and diverse communities.

Research and consultations clearly show that the County of Brant recognizes this responsibility and it has already made positive changes to address accessibility. The team conducted further research through the equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) lens to identify areas where Brant could improve its communications. This analysis gives recommendations for short-term, medium-term, and long-term actions to enhance Brant's EDI communication practices.

Items the County of Brant Does Well

It's important to acknowledge the areas in which the County of Brant already excels with respect to incorporating EDI practices into its communications.

The County's social media channels and websites are well-maintained and up-to-date, giving residents relevant and timely information. Through consultation we learned that accessibility in communications has been a priority for Brant and standards have been created to reflect that. Additionally, the County's social media channels showcase some events and initiatives that promote diversity and inclusion in the community.

Best Practices and Recommendations for EDI Communications

There are areas where the County can further its EDI work. The following section outlines best practices and recommended timelines to improve EDI communications at the County of Brant.

Short-Term Recommendations

The following short-term recommendations can be implemented by the County of Brant relatively quickly and at a low cost:

- Include image alternative text (alt text) for all images and videos on County of Brant social media channels to improve accessibility for blind, partially blind, or hard-of-seeing people.

- Investigate how religious, cultural, or social observances can be displayed on County websites and social media pages (e.g., Ramadan, Eid, National Day for Truth and Reconciliation).
- Develop a "welcome package" for new citizens that is available at City Hall and online and make this package available in languages such as French, Hindi, and Punjabi, to reflect the community and newcomers to Brant.
- This "welcome package" can also be delivered to new residents to promote public engagement and connectivity to the community – even if they don't have internet access.

Medium-Term Recommendations

The following medium-term recommendations need more time and resources but can significantly further the EDI practices within the County's communications:

- Investigate and book training sessions on inclusive communication and leadership for the city council and senior managers to foster a common understanding of anti-racism, social justice, and issues that affect equity-deserving groups.
- Begin to formulate a "style guide" that directs how equity-deserving groups are portrayed, talked about, and consulted with. For example, codifying person-first language, confirming with communities how they wish to be spoken of, including equity deserving groups in photo shoots, stock images, and around Brant in appropriate ways.
- Contract a translator to investigate County communications in different languages, accessible via a QR code on the English version of postings on social media and physically.
- Scout and give information physically in central locations for people who don't have social media or internet access. This was a recommendation made by many staff during consultations.

Long-Term Recommendations

The following long-term recommendations require ongoing commitment and investment in resources and will have a profound impact on promoting EDI in the County's communication practices:

- Include EDI as a topic of priority when embarking on any County strategic planning session.
- Identify communities, places of worship, or cultural centres for consultation and communication dissemination within the County of Brant. For example, finding places where people gather and developing relationships with them.
- Hold focus group sessions with equity-deserving members of the community to learn more about what they face, unique challenges, and what they wish to focus on in the future.
- Develop more relationships with local First Nations and continue to engage with them.

Please refer to the Strategic Recommendations section for a full breakdown of recommendations and timelines.

Insights from Review of Best Practices

The following represents eight key observations gathered from three main resources:

1. Our past experience
2. Insights gathered through the process of the development of this master plan
3. Additional research

We have divided these key observations into the themes and best practices for municipal communications below.

Communications Master Plans and Inclusive Communications

Alignment and integration between marketing and communications initiatives is key for organizations because it gives regions the chance to give consistent and clear information to citizens and key stakeholder groups. Better coordination between marketing and communications also leads to more consistent messaging. Consistency improves user experience and customer service, which in turn is a better use of resources and reduces issues management. It's also been demonstrated through research that having a cohesive brand promotes and fosters investment and economic development in communities.

Growth can be a challenge to consistency and alignment.

More people have been moving from cities within the GTA to surrounding areas over the last few years. That migration is due to a few factors like inflation, less affordable housing in cities, and the work-from-home model. As a result, jurisdictions just outside those areas are some of the fastest growing in the province, like the County of Brant.

Municipalities like Brant are all trying to keep pace with the rapid growth. But the increased growth has caused greater demand for services, infrastructure, and communication strategies, and each are adjusting services to keep up with diversifying populations. That's why consistent and inclusive communications that respect diversity within the community should be of the utmost importance. Many municipalities are building communications master plans and establishing formal equity, diversity and inclusion policies, training and strategic plans.

These master plans are strategic “brand-building” communications plans that in some cases are granted the same significance as other more traditional strategic plans, such as official plans.

Communications master plans are cyclical, strategic, narrative, and marketing/communications plans that drive shorter term action plans (in the case of Brant's plan, a four-year cycle). These

master plans are guiding documents that aim to define and drive a strategic narrative across an organization and out to its audiences through multiple forms of communication.

A Shift to “Owned” Newsroom Communications and Online Channels (websites, blogs, social media)

More than 252 Canadian newspapers have closed or merged since 2010 – including news outlets in the County of Brant. That’s a problem for many municipalities that rely on local news outlets to reach citizens with community-centric news and information.

That’s why many leading municipalities are building their own newsrooms, focused on telling their own stories. Municipalities embracing the trend are also shifting resources and recruiting for specialized skills to sustain these new communications channels. These municipalities are also shifting their priorities to build communication capacity via social media “newsrooms,” websites, and blogs.

The Vision Survey (2017) surveyed 436 local government organizations in Canada and the U.S. to understand how they perceived the efficacy of their communications channels in 2016 and then later in 2021. Survey results demonstrated a dramatic shift by local governments towards prioritizing owned websites and social media. Also interesting is the death of the traditional news release and the emergence of engagement platforms to communicate more effectively with employees and customers.

Channel Growth and Sustainability – and the Adoption of New Technologies

Organizations are finding it difficult to sustain the constant need to curate, monitor and manage their digital and social channels.

That’s why many municipalities are adopting new technology like engagement platforms and apps (with a growing trend towards artificial intelligence and voice search) to promote engagement and customer service. Applying tech gives municipalities increased response monitoring and decreases response times to customer service issues, feedback and requests.

Some notable examples of technology adoption: The Region of Durham’s The Durham Region Waste app and YourVoiceDurham; Waterloo Region’s EngageWR; and Halton Region’s OneHaltonapp.

The City of Hamilton has also taken the step of creating a Chief Digital Officer, with a mandate to lead the city’s digital transformation – internally and customer-service facing. Adopting new technology aids municipalities in growing their engagement and helps them manage channel growth and sustainability – all resulting in an improved user experience.

Social Engagement and Targeted Content

Many organizations focus on growing their followers across corporate pages on social media. But the best practice for municipalities is reaching targeted audiences with relevant messaging, setting goals around content and campaigns vs. general awareness posts, and performance testing around topics or themes.

An effective place to begin is to survey residents – and review periodically – asking what channels residents currently use, what information they are interested in, and where/how they prefer to receive this information.

Some places have a dedicated tool that lets residents look at all city-run public works projects at a glance. For example, the City of Edmonton has several helpful tools on its website, including a transit-planning tool, an easy fee payment portal, and a tool that monitors traffic disruptions to help commuters plan their routes to work.

Public Engagement + Consultation

The City of Kingston's 2015-2018 Strategic Plan identified transparency and citizen engagement as an initiative under its Open Government priority. Kingston achieved this goal and won the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Canada award for Organization of the Year in 2019.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made building and keeping public trust harder than before – for all governments. That's why governments at all levels need to build robust public engagement strategies.

Similar to Brant, Kingston used [Bang the Table](#) software to achieve greater transparency and reach its citizen engagement goals. The Bang the Table software is robust and has many features that Brant is not currently using. We recommend that the County train key staff members to leverage more of the features Brant already has at its disposal to give residents more opportunities for engagement.

Brant must also demonstrate to its residents that information gathered is acted upon. Engagement is more than data collection - it's about the next steps taken from the information given. It is the full 360. Brant needs to complete the full cycle of engagement by demonstrating that it listens, learns, and then acts based on the feedback given by residents. Residents are more likely to engage in the future if the County shows them how their past feedback created change in the present. That kind of full-circle communication is what will break through cynicism and apathy and work long-term to build greater engagement.

To date, the County of Brant should be proud of their public engagement efforts and should be confident that they possess best-in-class engagement tools. There are many other jurisdictions that do not offer public participation in a single engagement portal or promote ways to participate in public engagement at all. By elevating community involvement to a new level,

Brant will secure a leadership position among other Ontario municipalities in terms of public engagement.

“Modern, effective communication is about engagement. It’s about achieving resonance. It’s about moving beyond sympathy to empathy. You will not simply be telling stories to audiences; you will be helping people to share theirs.”

Why Story Matters, Stanford Social Innovation Review, 2011

Taking Risks With “Voice” in Social Media Content

Not all government communications have to be devoid of personality – for example, social media content from Ottawa Public Health. Their Twitter, Facebook and Social Media channels use humour, memes, and creative partnerships to drive engagement with their audience. Audience engagement like this is valuable, because it ensures any news it delivers about public health matters is received by the audience that needs to hear it. This kind of strong engagement is made possible through a deep understanding of the audience through empathy, and the freedom to be creative in the content used.

Again, if the County of Brant wants to have out-of-the-box thinking in its communications, it will need to invest in the necessary training and permission-giving with respect to the Communications and Marketing Division to make those out-of-the-box ideas a reality.

Putting the Narrative at the Centre

Many leading municipalities across Canada have a consistent message across all their communications channels that put residents at its centre.

For example, the Region of Halton and the cities of Calgary and Winnipeg have quality customer service and public service reflected in every part of their communications – along with a message that demonstrates a good understanding of their residents.

As we have mentioned previously, Prince Edward County has reimagined its rural roots and has embraced growth and diversity. Prince Edward County builds on its popularity as a tourist destination by using consistent messaging, branding and storytelling.

Promoting Economic Development and Diversity (while maintaining rural roots)

Municipalities outside of the GTA are undergoing significant changes brought about by increased population growth and diversity. It is essential to recognize the need to embrace this transformative journey while simultaneously being respectful and mindful of the historic rural, small-town charm that forms the essence of the County of Brant.

Municipalities like Brant can strike that balance by creating a narrative that connects both sides of the coin through shared values – a celebration of diversity rooted in history and small-town roots.

Growth and diversity can bring about economic and overall prosperity – services increase to meet needs, more businesses are attracted to the area, skilled and diverse talent flock to the area, and suddenly there are new businesses, new investments, and more jobs – creating more future sustainability. Areas that keep pace with growth will develop more infrastructure, healthcare, education opportunities, and public service, all of which raises the local standard of living.

However, it is equally important to be respectful and mindful of the historic rural, small-town charm that has defined municipalities like Brant for generations. That’s why it is so important for a growth narrative to incorporate the history, traditions and community bonds that make up these municipalities. Showcasing the best of the past and future together will help to cultivate the sense of pride, community, and agency that municipalities want for their residents.

As an example, Stratford, Ontario is internationally recognized as a tourist destination for some of Canada’s best theatre and small-town charm. Stratford’s recognition didn’t happen by accident – or without local grumblings – but their record investment in economic development has paid off.

Stratford’s economic development falls under the brand [investStratford](#) and boasts the slogan, “Globally connected. Community driven.” And the slogan is accurate. The town enjoys international recognition with the arts which drive seasonal periods of economic gain that are enjoyed by the town year-round.

Stratford has been able to manage its tourism, welcome diverse newcomers and artists to the area, and have local businesses and residents gain from that welcoming. We recommend that Brant look to Stratford as an example of how to tie business drivers to growth and diversity such that everyone can see and feel the obvious benefits.

Website best practices

In an interconnected, digital- first world - municipal websites serve as a “virtual front-door” through which residents, businesses, newcomers, and visitors interact with local governments. A well-designed municipal website puts the narrative at the centre,

enhances transparency, encourages engagement, and ultimately serves as an information resource for the local community.

For example, in the 2019 - 2022 Strategic Business Plan for Halton Region, the Region determined that its core communications function is *customer service* and should be *digital first*. As a result, in 2019, Halton Region rebranded and launched new digital assets including a new website (www.halton.ca), new narrative/brand, revamp of the existing 311 service and a new app “*OneHalton*” to access essential municipal services.

The new Halton website is modern, clear, easy-to-navigate, accessible and serves as one of the best examples of a regional government website in Ontario.

In addition, the City of Calgary website (www.calgary.ca) puts their narrative at the centre, conveying a tone of polished professionalism and steadfast support to the aspirations of their residents. Their website is designed to be formal, giving a sense of stability and continuity, while “personality” is reserved for their social media channels.

Designing a user-friendly website ensures users can swiftly locate information that they seek, promoting efficiency and saving valuable time for both residents and municipal staff. As an example of taking customer service to the next-level and being a trusted information hub in the community, the City of Edmonton website (www.edmonton.ca) is one for Brant to look towards.

For example, Edmonton has a dedicated tool that allows residents to look at all city-run public works projects at a glance. In addition, they have a number of other helpful tools on their website, including a transit-planning tool, an easy fee payment portal and a tool that monitors traffic disruptions to help commuters plan their routes.

While some of these features are better suited to a large municipality, Brant can work to adopt customer service and design best practices.

The Communications and Marketing Plan

Based on the insights from the communications audit, consultations with staff through surveys and interviews, and identified best communications practices among comparable Canadian municipalities, we have developed a four-year communications and marketing plan to help the County deliver best-in-class communications.

This section outlines that plan, including a master narrative, a mission and vision for the Region's communications, a guide for the tone and voice of those communications, core communications priorities, specific strategic recommendations, as well as recommendations on the resources, training and tools needed to execute the plan.

Guiding Principles

Based on Insights Report, we have come up with the following guiding principles to shape the next four year communications and marketing plan for the County of Brant.

Maintain high quality, timely communications

Building on the County's strengths in delivering high-quality communication products, the County should continue producing accurate, relevant, and engaging content. This also means being proactive and responsive to events, ensuring that the County's brand and voice are clearly reflected across all communication channels.

Maintain balance between traditional and digital channels

With a mix of rural and urban residents, varying levels of internet access, and other demographic factors in the County, communications must continue to effectively cater to a diverse audience with varying information consumption preferences. That will involve addressing areas for improvement such as the County's website user experience and ensuring that residents across all postal codes receive vital direct mail communications, in addition to digital content.

“City officials sometimes assume that the public will celebrate important municipal operational successes. Yet it is rare for such news to capture the attention span of residents pressed with their own day-to-day activities. Behind every successful algorithm-based, data-smart policy solution, there lies a story of human beings endeavoring to solve a problem. These stories are worth telling - and sharing them can be a remarkably effective method for marshalling resident support. By building narratives around compelling projects, cities can both keep the public informed about their efforts and build residents' confidence in their local government.”

**Stephen Goldsmith, Director of the Innovations in Government Program,
Harvard Kennedy School**

Use narrative-driven communication to help residents understand growth

As the County grows, it's crucial to tell a story that lays out the facts, dispels myths, and gives residents a clear understanding of what's happening. Narrative-driven communications should be integrated into all discussions around growth and economic development, helping to put residents' impressions into context.

Strive for plain-language, digestible content

To ensure its communications reach residents, especially when it comes to complex policy items like the Official Plan or the Transportation Master Plan, the County needs to use plain language and easily digestible formats. This could involve experimenting with different formats such as short explainer videos, making complex topics easier to understand.

Empower councillors and staff as spokespeople and ambassadors

Councillors can enhance the credibility and impact of the County's messages, as they are familiar and connected figures in the community. Staff, while not as publicly recognizable, can also act as brand ambassadors, spreading the word about County activities and enhancing the County's presence in the community. The County needs to keep both groups well-informed and up to date about County projects and initiatives for this strategy to succeed.

Invest in engagement and seek out-of-the box ideas

Increasing community engagement is a key opportunity for the County. That could involve new public engagement events, initiatives to educate about the role of municipal government, innovative marketing systems, and hiring a public consultation specialist. It also includes weaving equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) best practices into communications, ensuring that the County is accessible and welcoming to all residents.

Master Narrative

About Narrative-Driven Communications

In 2023, every strong brand has a strong narrative – one that is clearly linked to a mission and a set of values. Immediately this brings to mind the names of some of the world’s biggest and most memorable brands, like Unilever, Coke, GE, Uber and Nike. These and other companies that are great at storytelling understand it is a powerful tool for communicating the possibilities that they can create for their customers, employees, partners, investors – or any other person or group they want to reach. They also know how to make target audiences feel like they are part of the story.

Nike has long marketed its shoes as just one part of a larger story of aspiration and achievement. A campaign for Nike running shoes won’t focus on the product – it will focus on the idea that you can become a better athlete by wearing Nike footwear. You can win that match. You can run that marathon. You are the story in the making that will one day become legend. The customer is the hero in virtually every Nike story.

This story-driven marketing approach has proven to be so effective at connecting with audiences in the private sector, that there’s a movement in business today to (a) combine the marketing, customer service and corporate communications functions, and (b) incorporate storytelling into just about everything – from marketing campaigns and sales presentations to internal company meetings and talent recruiting efforts.

Storytelling is more than a trend. It is here to stay. And based on a strong narrative that is tied to a clear set of values, it can be just as impactful for governments and cities as it can for businesses.

Current County Narrative

Brant does not have a set “narrative” per se at the moment, but there is a story to be told by the County’s existing communications.

As we noted in the insights section, when the County interacts with residents in any way, it tells a story. Telling that story with intention and consistency is key. Brant’s Communications and Marketing Division has helped the County achieve a more consistent brand through efforts to create policies and processes that can be repeated or adhered to across departments.

In addition, the Communications and Marketing Division has helped shape the story that is told by creating standards for customer service. The Division also created policies for social media engagement and moderation.

The most important thing is that most of the County’s communications tell a story that is service-oriented—from notices of road closures to information about garbage and recycling to recreational programs. The story this tells is that the County is here to make life easier for residents.

The downside of this narrative is that it is largely reactive. The County has an opportunity to build a narrative that looks to the future—and the challenges that come with it.

The biggest challenge the County faces in the future is similar to that of municipalities across Ontario, and across Canada—the challenge of high population growth. All municipalities are struggling to keep pace with growth, which causes increased demand for services, threatens the “small town” feel prized by so many in the County, and makes traffic worse.

Growth is coming to all municipalities—whether they wish it or not. That’s why we recommend that the County “own the narrative” on growth, reassuring residents that it will protect things they care about while taking advantage of the benefits increased growth has to offer.

As such, we recommend that the County use the following internal, guiding narrative for its next communications and marketing plan:

Core narrative

*Communications and Marketing Plan slogan: **A grand welcome***

History runs deep in the County of Brant.

You can feel it when you hike the trails or paddle the rivers around here. You can feel it when you visit a farmers’ market or see a tractor driving in the field.

We remind ourselves that the County of Brant is situated on lands that are full of rich Indigenous history and home to many First Nations, Inuit and Métis people today; we recognize the significance of their contributions to the past, present, and future of this land.

Today, Ontario is growing faster than ever before, and communities across our province are welcoming new neighbours every day. But there’s a difference in Brant.

Here, we want you to get a grand welcome; to feel included and that you belong.

We know that when we welcome new neighbours, it helps them grow strong roots of their own. And it helps them make our community even better, just like each generation before them.

At the County of Brant we help our communities by protecting the best of what we’ve built and making smart choices in how we grow.

We also provide services that help you every day, like road maintenance, garbage and recycling, and snow removal. We’re also responsible for the paramedics and firefighters who keep us safe. We maintain parks, run recreation programs, and support people in need.

But that’s not all the County does. We also do our best to keep you informed about decisions that affect our community – and give you the chance to be part of those decisions.

Because whether you've been in Brant for generations or you're one of our new neighbours, we believe we all deserve a say in our future. We'll do our part to give you high-quality, timely information — just check your mailboxes and newsfeeds for the latest update.

That's how we'll build a better future — by talking to each other. By getting involved. And by making our voices heard.

It's the same thing we've done for generations in Brant—keeping in touch with each other and solving problems together. And it's how we've grown strong roots and built thriving communities.

We promise to do our part as a County to help those conversations happen. We promise to be here for you by providing the services you rely on.

In the County of Brant, we want everyone to get a grand welcome.

Key messages

The most important points in the narrative are as follows:

- We remind ourselves that the County of Brant is situated on lands that are full of rich Indigenous history and home to many First Nations, Inuit and Métis people today; we recognize the significance of their contributions to the past, present, and future of this land.
- Ontario is growing faster than ever before, and communities across our province are welcoming new neighbours every day.
- But there's a difference in Brant. Here, we want you to get **a grand welcome**; to feel included and that you belong.
- When we welcome new neighbours, it helps them grow strong roots of their own. That helps them make our community even better, just like each generation before them.
- The County helps our communities by protecting the best of what we've built and making smart choices in how we grow. We also provide services that help you every day.
- We try to keep you informed about decisions that affect our community — and give you the chance to be part of those decisions.
- Because whether you've been in Brant for generations or you're one of our new neighbours, we believe we all deserve a say in our future.
- That's how we'll build a better future — by talking to each other.
- It's the same thing we've done for generations in Brant—keeping in touch with each other and solving problems together.

Applying the Narrative

With the master narrative established to drive communication's strategy, it needs to be applied across County's communications. The first step is to develop a boilerplate paragraph that would act as a public-facing, elevator-pitch version of the narrative.

The next task is for the County's Communications and Marketing Division to familiarize itself with the new narrative, including why narrative-driven communications are effective, as well as

the strategic goals and objectives of the narrative. Once they have done so, efforts should be made to share the narrative, its goals and objectives with all County staff, particularly if they interact with residents in any capacity.

Once everyone is familiar with the narrative, the County should use it as a guide going forward, integrating its themes and key messages into all future communications as appropriate. This begins by taking an inventory of all topline, current content on all County of Brant communications properties and channels and updating them where appropriate so they better align with the narrative and its key messages.

Mission, Vision and Tone

Mission and Vision Statements Defined

In general, a mission statement describes the “what” and “how” of an organization (sometimes also including the “why”), while a vision statement focuses more on the “why” or meaning behind an organization’s actions.

For example, Disney’s mission statement is *“to entertain, inform, and inspire people around the globe through the power of unparalleled storytelling, reflecting the iconic brands, creative minds and innovative technologies that make ours the world’s premier entertainment company.”* Their vision statement is *“to be one of the world’s leading producers and providers of entertainment and information.”*

Mission Statement Background

As we created a mission statement for the County’s Communications and Marketing Plan, we wanted to keep the overall narrative in mind. Our goal was not just to clarify the role of the Communications and Marketing Division, but to show how that role connects to the narrative.

Recommended Communications Mission Statement

We inform the people of Brant about County services that help them every day and give them the chance to be part of decisions that affect our community by delivering high-quality communications.

Vision Statement Background

The team’s goal was to create a vision for communications at the County that was aspirational rather than descriptive. The vision builds on the mission and connects back to the narrative and the priorities we heard in the insights report by focusing on services and building a welcoming community.

Recommended Communications Vision Statement:

We strive to be municipal leaders in proactive, engaging communications so we can improve the lives of our residents and give everyone in Brant a grand welcome through our work.

Communications Tone

As communications fulfills its mission and vision and executes against its narrative, it needs to keep a particular voice and tone in mind that is consistent with the values we bring to communications – both internally and externally:

In its interaction with the public and internally, Brant Communications will be:

- Helpful
- Creative
- Clear
- Respectful
- Inclusive
- Proactive
- Accurate
- Professional
- Collaborative
- Timely
- Provide value
- Story-driven
- Best-in-class
- Measurable

Current Communications service offerings and approach

Current Offerings

Communications planning and project management

The Division offers all County departments strategic consultation, planning and project management for communications and marketing initiatives such as advertising, campaign creation and management, and content development.

Issues and emergency management communications

The Division has created and maintains an issues and emergency communications plan that can be executed across the County to keep citizens informed and safe, and protect the County's reputation where applicable.

Public event support and consultations

The Division gives consultation to help all departments strategize, plan and execute events that align with their objectives. The Division also supports these events by taking on management and execution when needed.

Information kiosk management

The Division manages all County information kiosks, creating new print content for distribution, rotating the stock, and removing any outdated materials.

Public and Media Relations

The Division offers all County departments and the Mayor's office public and media relations strategies and execution to amplify communications regarding key decisions, projects, County events etc. The Division maintains strong relationships with local news outlets, editors and journalists to keep these channels open and receptive to County communications.

Marketing initiatives, including campaign creation and management, advertising (creative and spend management)

The Division handles the full lifecycle of marketing initiatives for the County. The Division handles strategic consultation to advise and plan all campaigns and creates, executes and manages omnichannel content including ad buys and spend management across the entire campaign.

Website management and SEO maintenance

The Division ensures citizens can find needed information on the County's main website and EngageBrant by updating content and managing SEO updates for improved online search.

Social media content creation and management

The Division creates diverse content for Brant's official social media channels and manages each channel's performance.

Brand management and creative services, including graphic design

The Division maintains consistency for the County's visual and brand identity by offering its creative services to all departments, including graphic design, video production, etc.

Strategic communications consultation

The Division offers strategic advice and expertise to County departments and senior leaders to enhance the development and rollout of major projects, events, decisions and other strategic initiatives.

Internal communications, including internal engagement campaigns

The Division manages and creates content and regular engagement strategies across the County's internal communications tool, Jostle. These efforts keep staff informed, empower them to search for content and add their voices to internal communications. Additionally, internal engagement campaigns add to Brant's company culture and boost its employer brand.

Video content creation, management and support for staff and Council

The Division enhances County communications by offering the full suite of video production services to staff and Council. Video production includes early-stage consultation and strategic planning, site scouting, on-location filming, and editing.

Community engagement and stakeholder outreach

The Division conducts and liaises engagement and stakeholder outreach when needed for County decision-making, strategic planning, event support, issues management and more.

Approach

Brant's Communications and Marketing Division has done tremendous work to ensure that the County has a proactive approach to its communications and marketing. Our research and consultations verified that from an external and internal audience's points of view, that proactive approach is translating into clear and informative communications and processes.

There are ways Brant can strengthen its proactive approach by including more opportunities for sharing issues management best practices, diversifying its traditional media, incorporating an equity, diversity and inclusion lens to communications, and solidifying internal touchpoints between the Division and County staff and Council.

Our recommendations will work to help the Division:

- Create greater engagement with "harder-to-reach" citizens.
- Expand the current traditional communication offerings.
- Educate and engage citizens of all ages in civic activities.
- Create greater opportunities for human connection between the County and its citizens.
- Break up any bottlenecks in processes.
- Keep departments and Council knowledgeable about how and when to engage the Division.
- Keep the Division proactively engaged with other County departments.
- Allow the Division early engagement on major works, decisions or initiatives that would benefit from an issues management perspective.
- Strengthen staff and Council's skills and confidence in spotting potential issues and applying basic issues management best practices to handling them.
- Train all applicable staff in plain language writing to further customer service and accessibility commitments and work to improve engagement with formal documents.
- Include equity, diversity and inclusion best practices into communications to improve the Division's work with citizens and neighbours.

In some cases, our strategic recommendations also come with the added benefit of improving the County's employer brand, giving Brant a competitive advantage in the race for good talent.

Strategic Recommendations

The team has outlined a series of recommendations that build upon the County’s Communications and Marketing Division’s strengths and proactive approach. Where applicable, our recommendations work to further the County’s strength in issues management and customer service. Many of our recommendations also help the Division build engagement by diversifying its traditional (non-digital) marketing and communications work. We give these non-digital recommendations as a means for the County to increase reach with “harder-to-reach” citizens and create unique opportunities to inspire greater civic engagement and education among citizens.

We have given date targets for the completion of each recommendation. These targets span the breadth of this plan’s four-year time period, assuming this plan starts on January 1st, 2024.

Process and Capacity Improvements	
Recommendation	Description
Recommendations to be completed by July 2024	
Improve internal awareness of staff roles/responsibilities.	The Division should promote the Marketing and Communications Division flow chart (hosted in Jostle) as a refresher to staff and Council about the Division’s roles and responsibilities. Promoting this chart will help refresh staff and Council members on who they can contact within the Division for certain questions, concerns and updates. This ensures that communications happen with the right person and engagement or education opportunities aren’t missed.
Inspire greater engagement from designated departmental Comms/Marketing liaisons with “Lunch and Learn” style events.	<p>The County has designated Comms/Marketing liaisons across departments. The staff in these roles are responsible for knowing how and when to engage with the Division for their department’s communications or marketing needs and vice versa. However, engagement within this group of designated staff is not consistent. To breed more consistent engagement, the Division should create a quarterly or bi-monthly cadence to host this group off-site. These off-sites could look like a mid-week lunch, a Thursday afternoon social gathering – anything that makes the event enjoyable, special, a “perk.”</p> <p>Creating an experience around the liaison role will help to differentiate their responsibilities from their other work and give them a greater sense of purpose and importance in their unique roles with the Division. That sense of purpose will help to increase engagement in this group. Their engagement then helps the Division remain proactive in how and when departments are engaging them.</p>

<p>Involve HR in building out Jostle.</p>	<p>The County’s internal communications channel, Jostle, wavers in engagement. The Division should involve the County’s HR department to maximize this channel’s application in employee engagement and retention.</p> <p>Jostle can be a place to celebrate work anniversaries, showcase employee bios and features, and it can be a place to celebrate, acknowledge or encourage professional development among staff. Jostle is an internal engagement channel that, with HR’s help, could also become a strong work culture channel for Brant.</p>
<p>Give the Communications and Marketing Division a formal seat at the leadership table.</p>	<p>The Director of Brant’s Communications and Marketing Division needs a seat at the County’s leadership table to advise on issues through a communications and issues management lens.</p> <p>With the promotion of the past Division Director to a leadership role, the Division has an informal relationship with leadership. Leadership also has the benefit of the past Director’s experience in Communications. These positives need to be formally maintained to properly conduct issues management communications for the County. An official seat for the Division will help the County save time, resources and any risk to reputation by spotting and getting in front of potential problems.</p>
<p>Continue emphasis on expanding a plain language approach to all formal documents to increase understanding and engagement.</p> <p>Similarly, continue to emphasize digestible communications to increase understanding and engagement.</p>	<p>Expand the Division’s emphasis on a plain language approach to include all formal documents County-wide. Expanding plain language principles across the County will help all departments create documents, including reports, that are understandable, engaging, and accessible for non-native English speakers (e.g., avoiding acronyms, complex sentence structure, etc.) An emphasis on plain language means citizens and staff can digest information more clearly and quickly learn about important initiatives happening in Brant.</p> <p>Expand on the Division’s good work regarding content creation to include short and digestible content around key formal documents like the Official Plan. Creating short and compelling content like explainer videos, basic animations, infographics, etc., can help the public understand and better engage with major County initiatives.</p>
<p>Examine the frequency of communications and timelines for critical projects.</p> <p>Establish a cadence for communications around critical projects.</p>	<p>The Division should examine the current cadence and volume of internal and external communications for major projects. This examination should also include any patterns in the timelines for when the Division is brought into projects with other departments or Council.</p> <p>Based on the examination of current trends, the Division should establish the ideal cadence and volume of communications from start to finish on critical projects. This ideal should also include to whom communications are directed (an internal or external audience and any specifics within those groups).</p> <p>The Division must also establish an ideal or “best practice” timeline for departments and Council to follow when needing the Division’s services. This ideal timeline should be socialized with County departments and staff to get everyone on the same page.</p>

	Establishing a best practice timeline will ensure that every department knows when to engage with the Division and no communication or marketing opportunities get missed to the detriment of the project.
Improve performance across County social media channels.	<p>The County’s social media accounts are quite active and boast good engagement. But the Division can implement several tactical strategies to build engagement.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Staying aware of new channels to adopt or older channels to abandon. For example, Meta’s Threads or Twitter (now “X”). · If staying on Twitter, boost post views and engagement numbers by encouraging retweets/likes especially with other accounts that have large followings, and local councillors/municipal officials. · Improve the organization of Instagram stories. · Increase overall engagement on static Instagram posts. · Remove and report spam reviews on the County’s Facebook page. · Diversify content on LinkedIn beyond recruitment and employer brand efforts. · Align sub-channels with the County’s main channels: Paramedic, Fire, and Economic Development and Tourism. (Pending approval of new hires and increased capacity for the Division.)
Develop public engagement best practices	Create a best practice document for public engagement which includes methods to analyze and contextualize public feedback and data, creating code of conduct, reviewing advisory committees
Recommendations are to be completed prior to or between July and December 2024.	
Improve awareness of ongoing projects and activities with an internal dashboard.	Create an internal dashboard that gives users an overview of current County projects and major decisions. This is ideally a complement to Council’s “Friday Files,” giving councillors a high-level view of the progress or outcomes of projects and decisions. This dashboard can help to reduce the load of information currently given in the weekly files.
Designate and empower “Brant ambassadors.”	<p>Build out the County’s engagement and issues management work by designating and empowering “Brant ambassadors” to develop strong relationships with community leaders. The Division will lead in identifying reliable “community pillars” who can be consulted with or simply briefed in advance of initiatives. The County is not intending these community members to be its mouthpiece. Rather, the County can use these strategic relationships to get more real-time or “on-the-ground” data to help it make the best decisions for its citizens. For example, getting better information about what stakeholder groups could support or oppose regarding an upcoming County decision.</p> <p>The Division will equip and train select County staff to be “Brant ambassadors.” The Division will also support this initiative by creating key messages on major projects or decisions for Councillors and staff to use in their ambassador roles.</p>

<p>Incorporate more of the tools and features available through Bang the Table.</p>	<p>The new public consultation specialist will soon be responsible for the EngageBrant site – a Bang the Table product. But Bang the Table offers more site features than Brant is currently using – many of these features are built to encourage engagement and deliver better data reporting.</p> <p>We advise current Division staff to investigate the available features, undergo additional training, adopt those that suit Brant’s needs, and increase their learning on this software to complement the future efforts of the public consultation specialist.</p>
<p>Expand and improve non-digital communications with more print mail/direct mail.</p>	<p>The County should expand non-digital marketing and communications efforts with more print mail/direct mail campaigns to improve reach with “hard to reach” citizens like those in the more rural areas or without high-speed internet, or citizens who don’t engage online.</p> <p>The County could also improve the distribution of and engagement with appropriate print material through site activations like “pop-ups” or door-knocking campaigns. (This recommendation is dependent on new budgetary resources for increased print materials and distribution efforts.)</p>
<p>Continue the Division’s work to build and execute an omnichannel engagement campaign.</p>	<p>Continue to build wider-spread engagement with the County through an omnichannel approach – putting emphasis on more non-digital tactics. For example, hosting special projects, events, or contests. Partnering with all-ages community gathering places like libraries to co-produce engagement events and promote County content. Increase work with elementary and secondary schools to promote civic engagement and bridge gaps in civic education with co-produced events, contests, panels, and information days.</p>
<p>Recommendations are to be completed by December 2024.</p>	
<p>Improve user experience across the County’s main website.</p>	<p>Improve customer service experience across the County’s main website by increasing its functionality with added online tools and plug-ins, where applicable.</p> <p>Enhance the website’s searchability by adding a tool for “quick search.”</p> <p>Add a public-facing dashboard for increased customer service and engagement on important decisions or developments within the County.</p> <p>Consider a commute-planning tool to keep the public updated on road closures. (Also a good feature to encourage citizens to stay engaged with the County’s main page.)</p> <p>Add an easier fee-payment portal to give citizens a more intuitive and frictionless way to make payments.</p> <p>This dashboard can also incorporate Brant’s 511 information (again, a good addition to keep citizens frequently engaging with the page).</p>

<p>Encourage Brant ambassadors to engage with the public school system to bring civics into classrooms.</p>	<p>Public education plays a role in breeding long-term civic engagement by introducing the subject at a young age. The Division can help schools further their work and enhance civic engagement in Brant by creating opportunities for select County staff and Council (“Brant ambassadors”) to participate in classroom discussions, panels and activities for elementary and secondary school students.</p>
<p>Build processes to “close the loop” on public feedback.</p>	<p>Further current engagement efforts by building processes and campaigns to demonstrate the positive outcomes of public engagement.</p> <p>Citizen engagement is often lower at the municipal level. So, it is advisable to show the public how their contributions “moved the needle” for Brant. When the public can see a tangible outcome that resulted from their effort, they are more inclined to contribute in the future. (Also, in part, a customer service strategy.)</p>
<p>The Communications and Marketing Division to approve all public-facing material.</p>	<p>The Division must vet all public-facing County communications, documents, notices, or promotional materials to ensure brand unity, readability and accessibility compliance and apply an issues management lens where potentially needed. This recommendation ensures that the County’s messaging and visual identity are consistent, vetted with an eye to issues management, compliant with accessibility standards and aligned with the County’s EDI commitments.</p>
<p>Re-examine social media practices and output.</p>	<p>Social media is an excellent platform for disseminating compelling and educational content to further civic engagement and bridge the gap in civics education among residents. We recommend that the new public consultation specialist support County events on social media with compelling content to increase awareness and engagement from the public. We also recommend that County staff and departments regularly produce fact-based content to increase public engagement and knowledge about County initiatives and the role of municipal government.</p> <p>The County should also consider creating social media guidelines for Council to better support their needs by offering best practices for social media.</p> <p>Additionally, Council has helped to boost County social media engagement and post views, so guidelines can also help the County learn best practices from Council so each can support each other in engaging with and informing constituents.</p>
<p>Recommendations are to be completed by or between December 2024 and January 2027.</p>	

<p>Increasing Communications and Marketing Division capacity with more staff and training.</p>	<p>Hire for roles in the Division to build capacity for increased communications, marketing and design output and brand consistency. Upskill new and existing staff to improve the County’s current digital offerings and stay in step with industry advancements like the intersection of communications or design with artificial intelligence (AI).</p> <p>Hiring should consist of a Marketing Assistant to manage advertising across all divisions for improved brand consistency and ROI on ad spend.</p> <p>Hiring should also consist of a Graphic Design Assistant to increase capacity for the Division to improve brand consistency by taking on all public-facing designs, infographics, short explainer videos, etc. (In the short term, it’s possible to combine the two job responsibilities into one Assistant role. However, the single role should expand into two over the next three years in order to achieve many of the long-term goals laid out in this four-year plan.)</p>
<p>The Division to take on the design of all public-facing visual assets for greater brand consistency.</p>	<p>Expand the Divisions graphic design purview to take on all public-facing visual assets for the County to ensure brand and messaging consistency. (Pending approval for increased capacity within the Division.)</p> <p>Increased consistency with visual identity and messaging are required to ensure Brant’s commitment to EDI with regard to accessibility compliance, diverse representation, and accessibility for non-native English speakers. Additionally, increased visual brand consistency gives communications and marketing from the County higher visibility in “saturated” online spaces like social media threads.</p>
<p>Apply an Issues Management lens to all County decision-making.</p>	<p>The Division should help the County develop a decision-making rubric with a lens to issues management. This, in combination with a formalized seat with leadership, will help the County prevent time and resource loss or any reputation damage that can come from decisions made without an eye to potentially harmful issues.</p>

<h2>Narrative Transition</h2>	
Recommendation	Description
<p>Recommendations to be completed by July 2024</p>	

Key message development.	<p>Develop key messages that align with the new narrative. The Division can use these messages to update all appropriate communications and marketing materials. Additionally, the Division should create a boilerplate paragraph which will act as the public-facing “elevator pitch” to address growth in the County.</p> <p>The County should also pull growth and diversity keywords from the narrative to update the County’s meta tags, descriptions on search engines etc. to update SEO.</p>
Update existing products and materials.	Inventory and update the topline (current) content on all communications properties and channels so they better align with the narrative and create messaging consistency.

Staff Development	
Recommendation	Description
Recommendations to be completed by July 2024	
Narrative training for communications staff	Brief all communications staff across the organization on the new narrative, including its goals, objectives, approach, and how it can guide all communications. This recommendation will help staff take ownership of the story, find ways to use it in their work, give additional insight into the role of communications, and help the County tell a consistent story about its growth.
Train all staff on basics in issues management	<p>Our survey of County staff showed that many only felt “somewhat” comfortable knowing how to spot a potential issue. For this reason, we recommend that the County provide some basic training in issues management/emergency management to applicable County staff and Council.</p> <p>Training will help staff and Council sharpen their issues management skills, understand how issues management intersects with their role, and ultimately helps the County remain proactive and focused should an issue present.</p>
Conduct plain-language training workshop	Request outside plain-language training for all key cross-departmental staff to increase adoption, build communication skills, and help the County further its accessibility compliance commitment.
Recommendations are to be completed prior to or between July and December 2024.	

<p>Create a comprehensive communications professional development plan. (key issue, making time for it.)</p>	<p>Build the Division’s skill sets by developing and implementing a comprehensive communications professional development plan for staff. This plan should also include the cadence for professional development in the Division. This recommendation benefits current staff, helping them build their skills and advance their careers. It is also beneficial for the County of Brant’s employer brand, making the County a desirable employer in the eyes of jobseekers.</p> <p>We recommend the following upskill areas as they touch on dynamic subjects that require continual learning:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · AODA-compliant communications and design · Trauma-informed emergency communications and issues management · Digital design, web development · Using Large Language Model-based software for communications and design
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<h2>Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Best Practices</h2>	
Recommendation	Description
<p>Recommendations to be completed by July 2024</p>	
<p>Re-examine the Official Special Day list and create decision-making rubric to determine which diverse religious, cultural, or social observances the County of Brant observes.</p>	<p>Create a decision-making rubric to determine which religious, cultural or social observances Brant will honour.</p>
<p>Revamp digital images</p>	<p>Include image alternative text (alt text) for all images and videos on County of Brant social media channels to improve accessibility for blind, partially blind, or hard-of-seeing people.</p>
<p>Recommendations are to be completed prior to or between July and December 2024.</p>	
<p>Inclusive communications and leadership training for senior staff and Council.</p>	<p>Investigate and book training sessions on inclusive communication and leadership for County council and senior managers to foster a common understanding of anti-racism, social justice, and issues that affect equity-deserving groups.</p> <p>This recommendation benefits current staff and Councillors by giving them an upskilling opportunity in a dynamic skill-building area that can also advance careers. The recommendation also benefits the County’s employer brand, demonstrating its culture and available opportunities for future job seekers. And it will ultimately work to help staff and Council better serve the increasingly diverse citizens of Brant.</p>

Recommendations are to be completed by or between December 2024 and January 2027.	
Investigate Google Translate and other tools for adding translation capability to the website and important documents.	Investigate Google Translate for adding easy translation options to the County's websites. Investigate contracting a translator to make more complex County communications available in different languages or accessible via a QR code on the English version of communications documents.
Recommendations are to be completed by January 2027.	
Create and implement an EDI "style guide" to help the Accessibility Department.	Begin to formulate a "style guide" that directs how equity-deserving groups are portrayed, talked about, and consulted with. For example, codifying person-first language, confirming with communities how they wish to be spoken of, including equity-deserving groups in photo shoots, stock images, and around Brant in appropriate ways.
Outreach role to take on community and cultural consultation.	The new Outreach and Engagement role should identify communities, places of worship, or cultural centres for consultation and communication dissemination within the County of Brant. For example, finding places where people gather and developing relationships with them.
Current and ongoing	
Prioritize EDI focus in all strategic planning.	Include EDI as a priority topic for any County strategic planning sessions.
Strengthen Indigenous engagement.	The County and Division should advance their EDI commitments and community outreach initiatives by developing more relationships with local First Nations. Growing and maintaining these relationships over time will help the County and the Division understand how they can better serve Brant's Indigenous citizens and the County's Indigenous employees, and foster working relationships with neighbouring communities.

Non-traditional Communications and Marketing Recommendations	
Idea/Recommendation	Description

Recommendations are to be completed by July 2024	
Virtual town tours	<p>As a collaboration between the Division and Economic Development and Tourism, the Communications and Marketing Division could produce video tours of select locations in Brant – in the creative vein of other online video tourism content. The target audience for these videos would be new citizens to Brant. And the video’s content would be geared around introducing newcomers to the County, showing them the local “hot spots,” guiding them along the nature trails, and showing them how to get to the library, the local shops, the hospital, etc.</p> <p>As a bonus – and to build on the success of the “People of Brant” series – these videos could be hosted by locals, showcasing their daily lives and giving advice and tips to potential new neighbours. Having long-time residents host these videos would be a great way to bridge the gap for new citizens and inspire deeper engagement – much like having an “onboarding buddy” when starting a new job.</p>
Recommendations are to be completed prior to or between July and December 2024.	
Develop and implement County-branded “grand welcome packages” to be run and overseen by the Engagement Specialist.	<p>Brant has a rolling engagement opportunity by translating the growth narrative into a physical “welcome package” given to new residents. These packages would include marketing materials from the County to introduce new residents to the local parks, recreation activities, events, emergency numbers, and other staples of community life in Brant.</p> <p>The County should also approach local businesses to help make these welcome packages an opportunity for economic development by including promotional flyers, coupons or samples from local businesses.</p> <p>These packages should be made available in multiple languages such as French, Punjabi, and Hindi – either in different print versions or through a QR code for translation.</p> <p>These packages could be delivered by County staff, County volunteers, or through partnerships with local realtors to enhance customer service and make a lasting first impression that could spur increased engagement from new citizens. The County can also make these packages available at designated Brant locations.</p>
Recommendations are to be completed by December 2024.	

“Doors Open” style events hosted by the County

The County could host an annual engagement event “Doors Open Brant” (akin to [“Doors Open Toronto”](#)).

This event would encourage Brant’s citizens to engage with the municipality and get a behind-the-scenes look at how local government functions. Activities within this event could range from touring otherwise closed-off municipal and historical sites, or engaging in “mock” government functions, or functions from ‘A Day in the Life of the Mayor.’

To encourage a personal connection with the public, staff and Council could play a leading role in hosting on-site activities, tours, or panels for the “Doors Open” event.

Conclusion

Canada celebrated growing by 1 million people in 2022, with 300,000 of those new Canadians in Ontario.

That's almost ten times the total population of Brant.

It's no wonder communities across the province are experiencing growing pains. With the population boom unlikely to slow down, it will pose a communications challenge for municipalities everywhere into the foreseeable future.

Through the process of this project, our team has come to respect and admire the high standard set by the County of Brant's communications and marketing division. There is room for improvement of course—we would not have offered nearly 40 recommendations otherwise.

But from top to bottom, the Division does an excellent job. From engaging social media content to useful printed materials to large-scale fundraising campaigns, the Division is already a leader in municipal communications.

That's why the focus for our team has been to set the Division up for the communications challenges ahead—especially around growth.

And good communications starts with a good story.

To help people in Brant better understand the growth in the County and the issues that come with it, we've created a narrative focused on keeping the best of the past and taking advantage of what the future has to offer.

For people to feel that they're getting the best, Brant's communications must continue to be best in class. That is what our strategic recommendations intend to achieve.

From investments in staff capacity to better support for senior leadership to welcome packages for new residents, we expect these recommendations to make Brant's communications more sophisticated, effective, story-driven, inclusive, and even a bit “out of the box.”

By staying best in class and focusing on how to frame the story of growth, our team has little doubt that the County of Brant will continue to be a leader in municipal communications.